

## **Chapter 25 - Time for a Sabbatical**

One day in the summer of 1998 Subhadra and I went to meet the Divisional Commissioner in Indore regarding the false propaganda being made by the police regarding our being Naxalites. The police in Barwah had sent out enquiries regarding our antecedents to Kolkata and Bastar. The police in Charama had gone to Subhadra's village and asked around about her. They had told the people there that Subhadra was a suspected Naxalite and this had created quite a stir of a negative kind among the people of the village. The Naxalites were considered to be some kind of marauding aliens by all and sundry in Kanker district. Even Subhadra's brother, a marginal farmer making do on half a hectare of land, thought nothing of their ideology and was instead angry with their violence which he considered to be wanton killing. The Commissioner, the same person who had earlier told the women of Katkut that they had caused a national loss by striking work against the landed farmers and letting their cotton crop decay, blandly said that since we had chosen to confront established power structures we should be prepared to face harassment. The police had their job to do, he said, if by chance we were indeed Naxalites and did do something violent then they and along with them he too would be held responsible for not having been alert. There was bound to be discontent given the fact that the government did not have enough resources to satisfy everybody, he said in matter of fact bureaucratese. The administration's job was to see that protests arising from this did not get out of hand. The fact that we had come to complain to him, he said superciliously, showed that we had failed in our mobilisational efforts and needed to work harder to strengthen our mass organisation so that it could better tackle the onslaught of the state!

This straight from the shoulder talk from this particularly obtuse Commissioner proved to be the last straw and had a profound impact on Subhadra. She had first drifted into social work a decade back and then gradually into political activism in search of a living. She had not made any conscious choice to fight for the rights of the poor and dispossessed. She had had no idea about the real character of the state and its bureaucracy even at the highest level. She had naively assumed that the state was indeed well disposed towards the poor and it was only the people at the lower level who were bad and corrupt. But especially over the past three years or so in Katkut she had learnt the hard fact that the state was itself biased in favour of the rich and powerful. This matter of fact statement from a senior IAS officer that it was more important for him to ensure that protests against injustice didn't get out of hand rather than trying to set right the wrongs that had caused them, disheartened her deeply. She decided she had had enough of beating her head against an unyielding wall and withdrew totally from activism for some time to concentrate on catching up with her studies instead.

The practical problems thrown up by her work had left her puzzled and directionless. She dismissed my attempts to bring light into her darkness by saying that the two bouts of hepatitis that I had suffered as a child had jaundiced my mind also! She turned towards reading books on social and political theory on her own for understanding. However, the education she had received in school she found was wholly inadequate for her to understand these books. So in 1997 she decided to start formal studies again by doing a bachelor's degree in Political Science. Searching around for a college to do it from she came upon a brochure of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), which offered distance-learning courses. The brochure said that the courses were tailor made for those who might have missed out on higher education after their high school. Impressed by this she had enrolled for the Bachelor's Degree Programme of the university. However, on receiving the course material she found that like all advertisement brochures IGNOU's too had overstated the

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easiness of the course to snare unsuspecting people into opting for it. She found that to pass the exams she would have to put in much more time than was possible while continuing with her work. This too acted as a spur for her to take a sabbatical from political activism to start studying in earnest.

The main reason for Subhadra being unprepared for higher studies of a tough standard was the poor quality of the basic education that she had received during her school years. This is in fact a common refrain in most rural areas and thereby hangs a sordid tale of education in India traditionally having been the privilege of a very few upper caste people. There is a quaint story in the Aitareya Brahmana of the Rig Veda in this regard (Sen, 2000). There was an upper caste brahmin sage who had two wives one a brahmin and the other a dalit. He had a son each by his two wives. In Vedic times the sages used to teach their disciples including their sons while chanting the Vedic verses during yagyas or fire sacrifices to the Gods. Both the wives sent their sons to their father for their lessons when he was in the midst of one such yagya. The sage fondly took his brahmin son onto his lap and began teaching him the verses but totally ignored his other son who was half dalit. The dalit son came away crying and complained to his mother that his father had ignored him and so he would not be able to study. The mother initially was very depressed but later she said that she was a shudra or the daughter of mother earth and so she would ask her mother for a way out of this impasse. Vasundhara the Earth Goddess told her not to worry and said that she would herself teach her grandson. Thus it was that this son of a shudra, taught by the Earth Goddess became a very learned sage.

This dalit sage then took his revenge. Sanskrit is a language in which words have many meanings and there can be different interpretations of a sequence of words. Moreover the verses are sung in a particular meter and so often the words are juxtaposed in such a manner as to ensure that the total number of syllables fits into the meter regardless of the effect it has on the meaning of the sentence. Thus any particular verse can have many meanings some nonsensical and some highly philosophical. So to understand the true philosophical import of the verses in the Samhita portion of the Vedas it is necessary to know which meanings of words and which syntax of sentence to pick. This key has been given in the Brahmana portion of the Vedas. The dalit sage composed the Brahmana for the Rig Veda and then named it after himself. The name he chose was Aitareya or son of an itar or dalit person. So the most sacred of the brahminical Hindu texts can only be understood with the help of the key written by a dalit.

The parallel between the ancient dalit sage Aitareya and his modern counterpart Babasaheb Ambedkar is too striking to be missed. Not only did both of them acquire immense learning through their own perseverance in the face of difficulties but also similar to Aitareya's enlightening contribution to the understanding of the philosophical import of the Vedic verses, Babasaheb as the Chairperson of the Constituent Assembly was the guiding light behind the libertarian and affirmative portions of the Constitution of India, which are its only redeeming features. But in the same way as the high spiritual philosophy of the Vedas has been drowned out in the crass materialistic rituals of the actual Hindu religious practice of the priests so also the emancipating and egalitarian liberal and socialistic principles of our Constitution have been smothered under the colonial anti-people policies of the priests of the temples of modern India, the mainstream politicians and bureaucrats. Nowhere is this more so than in the sphere of education.

The British very cleverly reinforced the divisive and oppressive character of the Brahminical social order so as to minimise the chances of widespread revolt by the masses

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against their rule as Babasaheb petulantly noted in the presidential address to the All India Depressed Classes Congress in 1930 "... the British Government has accepted the arrangements as it found them and has preserved them faithfully in the manner of the Chinese tailor who, when given an old coat as a pattern, produced with pride an exact replica rents, patches and all." (cited in Ghosh, 1985 p 142). The British introduced a stunted education system for training native Indians to man the newer kinds of clerical jobs that were emerging as a consequence of their expanding imperial interests. They, however, discouraged the spread of scientific and technical education and so these remained the preserve of the rich upper castes, who could afford to go abroad to Britain and the United States for higher education. Almost all of the luminaries of the independence movement including Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar went abroad for their higher education as did the collaborators of British rule in India. Thus in the same way as the economy in India was stunted to bolster the development of the economy in Britain so also the education system in India was stunted to force people seeking better education to fill the universities and colleges of Britain. The net result was that the education system in India right from the primary schools to the universities " did little to promote analytic capacity or independent thinking and produced a group of graduates with a half-baked knowledge of English, but sufficiently westernised to be alienated from their own culture" (Maddison, 1971 p 42).

The upper castes who largely collaborated with the British took advantage of this restriction of modern education facilities to extend their sway over Indian society and monopolise the English medium education system introduced by them. Thus the upper castes have been enjoying a far greater share of the state funded education system right from the British times to add to the monopoly they had of traditional education. It is this monopoly over the state funded education system that remains grossly inadequate in reach and spread in comparison to the vast population even today that has given the upper castes effective control of the Indian state and economy. That is why they are trying their level best to hold on to this monopoly and have come out so vociferously against the introduction of increased reservations for the backward castes in the state funded education system (Raina, 2006). The American philosopher and educational activist John Dewey had taught Baba Saheb during his stint at the Columbia University in New York. He learnt from his teacher that the most effective way to break the hold of superstition and irrationalism was to impart a critical and empirical education to the masses. So Babasaheb had joined the independent Indian Government in 1947 in the belief that as a minister he would be able to expedite this but found he could do very little in the face of covert upper caste opposition. This too was one of the reasons for his resignation from the government in 1951 along with his failure to get the act ensuring equal inheritance rights for women passed.

This active opposition of the upper castes in British times to the spread of school education to the lower castes acted as a further brake upon the number of people from the lower castes getting educated and so there was always an unsatisfied demand for educated people in colonial India. This meant that a low level job of some kind or other in the colonial economy and administration was always available to a lower caste product of this system, which assured a much better and easier lifestyle than that of a peasant or artisan. Consequently even this half-baked education was prized and a model that mostly consisted of mechanical learning by rote of useless information having little relevance to the social, economic and technological problems that the majority of Indians faced became yet another albatross around their necks. Gandhi, wanting to make a break with this nefarious legacy, had talked of "Nai Talim" or a new education system to train youngsters in their own language

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and idiom and in matters more suited to reviving the rural economy which had been devastated by the British colonialists (Rammurthy, 1990). Like much else of Gandhi, however, Nehru jettisoned this also and instead continued with the half-baked British pattern of school education for the expanding government education system in rural areas after independence. Thus even today uninspiring and unsuitable syllabi written in an alien language are taught by poorly qualified teachers and learned by rote by masses of rural children without a proper development of their cognitive and analytical skills. The teachers pass the students from class to class unless they are particularly inept. Examinations, which are supposed to be checks on the relevance of the system, have in most schools been reduced to an absurd farce as there is mass copying in which the teachers themselves help the students. A common joke in Madhya Pradesh is that the State Education Board Examinations are so named because in these the teachers write down the answers to the question paper on the black board for students to copy from! Even so a majority of the students are unable to pass since most of them are incapable of doing even that.

Even this faulty system worked for sometime in the initial two decades after independence as its products were absorbed into the expanding state system of production, marketing and services which began filling up the massive gap left by two centuries of colonial rule. But from about the time that Subhadra passed out of school the demand and supply mismatch, which had remained favourable to the students for nearly two centuries turned unfavourable. Globalisation and technological development rendered redundant the huge number of mostly poorly trained products of the school education system. The need was for a much less number of highly qualified personnel in specialised disciplines. The government school system, which was never properly equipped in pedagogical and human resources, found itself even more of an obsolescent remnant from an earlier era. Just when a huge infusion of funds and ideas was required for the revamping of education, the state and central governments lacked both. Thus the state education system right from the primary to the highest levels has very few quality institutions and so there is now a political battle on between various sections of society to try and corner as much of this as possible.

Even paying the teachers already on the payroll their salaries has become a problem for most states let alone the recruitment and training of newer ones in large numbers. The new Congress Government of Madhya Pradesh in 1994 decided to overcome this hurdle by palming off the responsibility for school education to the panchayats with minimal salaries for teachers and almost no funds for infrastructure and so expanding its reach substantially. It then publicised this as a revolution in the provision of education to hitherto underprivileged sections like the adivasis and dalits in remote rural areas under the rubric of the "Education Guarantee Scheme" (EGS) as has been mentioned earlier. It was aided in this by a loan from the World Bank under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) for the design of better learning materials, training of teachers and provision of basic infrastructure like buildings, blackboards and other teaching aids. However, the government through both the DPEP (Kumar, et al, 2001) and the EGS (Leclerc, 2003) has not been able to do much more than provide rudimentary schools where there were none while at the same time diluting even further, like the homoeopaths do with their medicines, the quality of pedagogy in the government schooling system, hoping like them that this will increase the curative power of the schooling solution provided! As a result in urban areas the government school system in Madhya Pradesh has been almost totally superseded by private schools and even in rural areas this is slowly becoming the norm.

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Once I spent the night with a friend who was the head master of a government school in a market village in Jhabua district. He spent the whole night sitting with a pile of answer sheets of students from EGS schools in front of him re-marking the answer papers so as to make them eligible for passing. He said he was the coordinator for the EGS schools in his area and there were strict orders from above that more than fifty percent of the students from these schools should get pass marks otherwise he would be penalised with a skipping of an increment in his salary! Similarly during the census of 2001 the government teachers who did the enumeration work were given orders to put down as many people as possible as literate regardless of their actual reading and writing abilities and this is what has resulted in the phenomenal increase in literacy in the state from 44 percent in 1991 to 64 percent in 2001! Indeed some spot checks that I conducted of the Census 2001 data with regard to the characteristics of the work they were doing in a few villages in the course of some research work that I was engaged in revealed that they were completely cockeyed with respect to the actual situation prevailing. This is the kind of spurious data on the basis of which planning and research takes place in this country and little wonder that they fail to address the burning issues that affect the poor and marginalised.

Realising that relevant education of good quality was a sine qua non for building up a sustainable mass movement the KMCS set up primary schools in remote villages in Alirajpur tehsil as early as 1987. Reading, writing and arithmetic were taught in the Devnagari script but using the Bhili language. Initially there were no textbooks. Instead, the teachers and the students used to conduct surveys of various kinds of their immediate surroundings and then analyse the results. The data and understanding gained from this were used to create textbooks for language, arithmetic, science, geography and history in Bhili. The teachers and the students together participated in the creation of learning material. Later a primer for learning in Hindi was developed in the same way. Learning by doing was the watchword. The stress was on building up a primary education system that would teach and inspire children to manage their own surroundings in a sustainable manner in accordance with their culture rather than incline them towards graduating to the mainstream education system that alienated them from their roots. However, this attempt did not carry on due to our preoccupation with the increasing struggles against the state.

Later on when in the mid nineteen nineties it became clear that political struggles were up against a wall that stifled creativity, many activists began seeking newer avenues in which to work. As mentioned earlier some of the KMCS activists left to pursue other opportunities. Amit and Jayashree wanted to continue working among the Bhils but with two toddlers to take care of they could not continue to live the topsy turvy life of political activists anymore. Feeling that serious work needed to be done in the sphere of education to build up a long term cadre of people committed to an alternative vision of society they decided to devote themselves to this. They thought of concentrating on the systematic development of education materials and an alternative pedagogy in accordance with the ideology of village-centred adivasi self-rule for the establishment of a socially equitable and environmentally sustainable society. The members of the Adivasi Mukti Sangathan supported the setting up of a training centre cum school called the Adharshila School in village Sakar near Sendhwa in Barwani district on a five acre piece of minimally productive agricultural land.

The experience of having run schools earlier had shown that effective teaching of adivasi children of illiterate parents require that they be drilled even after regular schooling hours. Since this was not possible with day scholars it was decided to run a residential school. Secondly it was decided, as far as possible, to make the parents pay in cash and kind for the



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education of their children so as to make the everyday running of the school financially self-sustaining. This, in turn, meant that the school would have to make the children proficient enough to perform well in the board examinations at the class five level to accord with the expectations of the parents most of whom would naturally be paying for an education that could get their children jobs later on. Thus the syllabus and teaching had to take care of both the needs of inculcating a critical attitude towards modern development in the children as well as providing them with the skills to make it good in the modern sector. Obviously, this is a tall order and requires a lot of hard and committed innovative work on the part of the teachers. So funds were collected from various external sources including SRUTI for the costs of curriculum development, teaching aids and part of the salaries of the teachers.

The school started from scratch without textbooks and the language used was Bareli a dialect of Bhili. Once again the earlier method of the KMCS of conducting surveys and writing down the rich oral literature of the Bhili creation myths was used to acquaint the children with the basics of language and arithmetic and in the process create primers. One such survey, which was both entertaining and educative, was conducted to find out how, if at all, the teachers were teaching in the government schools and then comparing the results with the procedures being followed in the Adharshila School. The local environment provided the material for scientific learning through observation and analysis and local history as related by the elders was recorded to prepare the history lessons. In addition to their studies the children have to put in two hours of labour everyday on the five- acre farm of the school so as to ensure that they do not lose touch with their peasant farmer roots. Possibly for the first time academic learning has become fun for Bhil children in a systematically run school environment.

The biggest problem confronting the teachers is that of reconciling the contradictory goals of developing and teaching a curriculum that critiques modern development and simultaneously prepares children to take the board examinations of the government school system. Commensurate with the high levels of technological development, the learning load of students in the mainstream schools has been increased phenomenally. Even children of families, which have had education for generations together find the syllabus tough and have to put in long hours after school and take special coaching to be able to perform well in examinations. Under the circumstances it is unrealistic to expect first or second generation literates coming from a pre-modern culture to digest the heavy syllabus. Just acquiring language, mathematical and analytical skills are not sufficient to ensure good results in examinations. A considerable amount of additional cramming has to be done to remember the massive amount of information. This forces the child towards an uncritical acceptance of the modernist assumptions on which the syllabus is based. This in turn considerably reduces the possibilities of a generalised revolt against modernism. Once again this is a Catch 22 situation. Most of the students leave after passing the class eight board examinations with flying colours to join a mainstream school for further studies instead of continuing in the Adharshila school.

Amit and Jayashree in fact have to contend with multiple problems like sourcing of funds, recruiting, training and then retaining teachers, developing curricula, envisioning inspiring and enjoyable extra curricular activities and managing the day-to-day operation of the school. While doing this they have also to look after their two young children who live with them and study in the Adharshila school along with the adivasi children. Most importantly they have stuck to the basic principle that the school should be run on the strength of the fees paid by the students and voluntary contributions made by individuals who

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agree with the style of schooling being provided rather than take large funds from institutional sources and so have to follow their dictates. Over the past seven years a barren piece of hilltop land has become a green arbour and a fountain of knowledge for a people who have never had the privilege of good education. It is a drop in the ocean perhaps but one that nevertheless sparkles with hope for the future. Subhadra and I have bowed to circumstances and shifted out from our residence in Machla village to drop anchor in Indore city despite our distaste for the urban environment so as to be able to educate our son in a mainstream school. Under the circumstances I have unending respect for Amit and Jayashree as they struggle on to improve the quality of education available to adivasi children, in a remote village like Sakar, which does not even have regular electricity supply.

The NGO Kishore Bharati had in the early nineteen seventies begun experimenting on the same lines as the Nuffield Program for popularising science education among school children that had been tried out in Britain by introducing activity and discovery based learning, tailored to the child's physical, social and cultural environment but with the difference that it was being tried out in a rural area (Raina, 2002). Later this became a full-fledged programme named the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) involving the central and state governments and various educational institutions. After a review of its operations a decision was taken to extend it beyond Hoshangabad district and some of the people involved in it set up the NGO Eklavya in 1982 to oversee this expansion. Later this innovation was extended to social science teaching both at the middle and primary levels from 1986 onwards. One important and novel aspect of this experiment was that it tried to work within the government school system and reform it rather than set up a parallel system outside of it.

Despite having secured high level governmental support over a fairly long period of time Eklavya too has had to contend with the tension between the demand for mainstream science education, which requires cramming and is examination oriented and the adoption of innovative teaching methods for rural children. The majority of teachers in the government schools are either not convinced about child and culture friendly pedagogy or are not prepared to put in the additional effort required to make learning fun for rural children. In all these thirty years only a hundred odd teachers have become committed proponents of this alternative pedagogy. Finally the educational bureaucracy is loath to relinquish its control over teachers, syllabi and examinations and allow wide-ranging innovation to take place. Despite some of the teachers of the HSTP having earned international accolades the government has not awarded them by giving them promotions or salary increments. Thus, despite having developed alternative texts and teaching methods of high quality which have gained worldwide recognition and conducted umpteen teacher trainings, Eklavya has failed to develop a sustainable school educational system with enough support from the parents who can effectively demand that this new mode of teaching continue and spread.

The net result is that in a bizarre development the HSTP was scrapped by the Government of Madhya Pradesh in 2002 (Menon, 2002). A local BJP MLA in Hoshangabad district had been trying ever since he got elected in 1990 to get the programme scrapped because it went against the obscurantist ideology of his party. Luckily the BJP government was dismissed in 1992 following the demolition of the Babri Masjid and so Eklavya got a reprieve. Thereafter the Congress Government of Digvijay Singh came to power and things became smooth once again. However, problems arose a second time because of a new set of circumstances. The high flying bureaucrats in charge of the EGS in their efforts to try and promote it as a revolutionary achievement of the Government of Madhya Pradesh in the

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sphere of primary education tried to get it certified as such by scholars of repute. They managed to get some commissioned laudatory evaluations done by economists and management academics (Vyasulu, 2000, Kothari et al, 2000) but failed totally in their attempts to get well known scholars of education to certify a basically fraudulent exercise. The bureaucrats in question angered by this rejection combined with the educational bureaucracy, which had for long been loath to continue with this radical programme and the persistent BJP MLA who had been continually petitioning the government against it and scuttled the HSTP. It is the tragic fate of this country that even after more than half a century of independence the manger of the state still remains the prerogative of political and bureaucratic dogs. So its second class citizens who cannot afford to pay for quality education have to remain satisfied with what has come to be called "second track schooling facilities" of dubious quality provided by the government (Dreze & Sen, 2002).

Meanwhile Subhadra found herself all at sea in the deep waters of the IGNOU course material. The problem was compounded by the fact that the texts had been originally written in English by the leading Indian scholars in their fields and then translated into Hindi. The normal practice for translation of arcane technical terms is to break up the English word into its Latin or Greek roots and then construct a Hindi word by combining the corresponding Sanskrit roots. This artificially created term being a specialised one is not found in any of the standard Hindi dictionaries. Moreover since the main words are in Sanskrit the sentences constructed with these also use a high Sanskritised Hindi, which has little relation to the colloquial Hindi that is popularly spoken. Thus making sense of the IGNOU course material is almost as difficult an exercise as deciphering the true meanings of the Vedas. Since this was beyond the capacity of Subhadra I had to assist her in a big way not only in understanding the meaning of the texts but also in doing the assignments which too had to be written in high quality Sanskritised Hindi. The crunch came in the examinations. The papers were set in such a way that they thoroughly tested whether the student had read and assimilated the course material properly and wholly. A study of past question papers revealed that there is no pattern discernible in the questions asked. So it is very difficult to predict the possible questions and prepare accordingly as is the custom in most universities in this country.

The inevitable result of all this was that in the initial stages Subhadra mostly passed her examinations by the skin of her teeth or sometimes failed. Even though I prepared the answers for a wide range of questions it was just beyond her capacity to cram all of them. So she had to write off the cuff answers to questions for which she had not prepared and obviously she did not have the proficiency to do so. The only saving grace is that a student could take as many as eight years at that time to pass the three-year course and so failed papers could be reappeared for or a lesser number of papers could be taken per semester. Just when Subhadra had begun to get a hang of things after about two years she conceived accidentally. We had initially planned not to have any children because this would have hampered our work in the field. We used to rely on a mixture of the use of condoms and the natural method to keep the baby away. The latter of course is highly unreliable, we had slipped up on two occasions earlier and Subhadra had had to get herself aborted. However, this time Subhadra said that since she had decided not to work in the field anymore for sometime she would like to go through with the pregnancy and so free herself from the accusation that she faced continually from women in the villages that she was infertile! "Baanjh kya jaane prasav ka dard" meaning what does an infertile woman know about the pains of childbirth, goes a common taunt that is used in rural settings. So Subhadra decided to



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pick up this knowledge and set her pursuit of academic knowledge in abeyance for two years till our son Ishaan was born and weaned into walking around on his own.

She took up her studies again and passed her papers without much trouble till only one paper remained. This was the foundation course in English. She had already failed in this once. We had decided then that after she had finished her other papers we would concentrate for one whole year on preparing for the English paper. In tune with the rest of the subjects in this too the question paper is extremely tough. There is an unseen passage on which questions are asked. There are extremely difficult questions on grammar, which I can only label as sadistic as even I had to think for sometime to answer them. Finally there are an essay and a dialogue to be written on subjects, which can be anything under the sun. Once again being totally unpredictable these question papers can be answered successfully only by a student who has a very good command of the English language. So even after a year of practice it was quite clear to us that Subhadra's passing the paper would depend totally on chance. I did a review of the question papers of a decade and prepared four sets of essays and dialogues on topics that I thought were the most likely and had Subhadra mug them up. Given the toughness of the other questions and the low number of marks she would get in them the only way she could pass her paper was that one of the topics for which she had prepared came in the essay and dialogue sections.

Obviously Subhadra was very nervous before the examination and constantly asked me whether she would be able to pass or not. On seeing her distress and searching around for something to comfort her with I suddenly had a brainwave. One of the topics I had prepared was one that had come the most often in some form or other - "Write about the person who has influenced you the most". I had prepared an essay on Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar for this topic. One of the salutations that members of the Bahujan Samaj Party frequently use is "Jai Bhim", Long live Bhim, acknowledging the contribution of Ambedkar to the cause of the dalits. So I told Subhadra to forget everything else and just go on repeating Jai Bhim to herself till she got the question paper and hope that a topic would come on which she could spew out an essay she had prepared. Not having much choice this is what she began to do and lo and behold when she opened the question paper and went straight to the essay portion she found a variation of a topic, which allowed her to write on Babasaheb Ambedkar! She passed the examination by a whisker on the strength of this essay and finally became a graduate all of seven years after she had first enrolled.

Once this IGNOU odyssey was over I began wondering as to how many people actually passed the BA examination given the toughness of the course and the exacting examination standards. The BA being the most basic graduation level course would be opted for mostly by people like Subhadra, coming from a disadvantaged background that had lost touch with education for a long time and wanted to catch up on it. But the fact of the matter is that Subhadra had been able to stay the course and become a graduate of IGNOU only because I was there to help her throughout. Not everyone is so lucky and so I surmised that very few people were actually successfully completing the course. I asked around in Indore and found that all the people whom I traced had dropped out of the course after enrolment having been frustrated by the toughness of the course and the examinations. This prompted me to write to IGNOU for statistics regarding the pass percentages disaggregated by caste category in the BA course over the past decade. There was no reply. I then got some of my journalist friends in Delhi to inquire about this and they too got fobbed off with vague replies. I then wrote to the Principal Secretary Higher Education of the Government of India who is

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an IAS officer from the Madhya Pradesh cadre that I know personally to get this information and once again drew a blank.

I then filed an application with the Public Information Officer of IGNOU under the Right to Information Act for this information. A subordinate of this officer replied and tried to fob me off with some vague excuse. I sent a stern letter to the Vice Chancellor who is the Designated Appellate Authority for IGNOU under the RTI Act, pointing out that the Public Information Officer was liable for penal action for having wilfully obstructed the furnishing of the information that I had demanded. This had some effect and the officer sent me the data but it was for only seven years from 1996 to 2002. There are still a lot of problems with the veracity and logical consistency of the data that has been sent and so I have now appealed to the Central Information Commission to direct IGNOU to furnish me with correct and detailed data for the whole decade from 1996 to 2005 so that I can carry out a thorough statistical analysis of the same. However, whatever data has been sent to me so far has overwhelmingly confirmed my suspicion that IGNOU has failed miserably in its self professed mission of "....knowledge ... dissemination through sustainable open and distance learning systems seamlessly accessible to all, including hitherto unreached, from among whom the leaders and innovators of tomorrow will emerge." (IGNOU, 2006)

The fact that students enrolled in a particular year do not all pass out or finally get struck off the rolls for non-completion of the course in the stipulated time together means that the data for enrolled, passed and failed students for a particular year are not for the same students. But by 2002 fourteen years had elapsed since the first batch passed out in 1988 and the data for 2002 reflect more or less a similar pattern as the data for the previous years from 1996 onwards and provide a fair indication of the substandard performance of IGNOU with regard to the BA degree course that it offers. A total of 35,844 students enrolled in 2002 of whom 63.4 % were females and 36.6% were males. The Scheduled Castes constituted only 6.2 % whereas their percentage in the population as a whole is 15%. Their female to male ratio was about the same as that for the total students enrolled. The Scheduled Tribes constituted 5.9 % whereas their proportion in the population as a whole is 7%. Their female to male ratio was again about the same as the total. The number of students who passed was a miniscule 1490, which if compared to the number enrolling is just 4.2 %. This percentage has secularly come down from 15.9 % in 1996. This is because while the numbers enrolling have gone up by 257 %, the numbers passing out have decreased by 32.2 % over this period of seven years. The numbers of students who have failed to complete the course in the stipulated time and so been struck off the rolls have increased in the same period by 204 % to 21178 in 2002. This resulted in the ratio of students struck off the rolls to those freshly enrolled going down from 74.3 % to 59.1 % in the same period. This means that given the continually decreasing numbers of students passing out there must be a big backlog of students who have to be struck off the rolls. Possibly they have been so struck off in the years subsequent to 2002 and so the disturbing data for those years have been withheld from me!

The most striking feature of the results is that of the considerably fewer number of female students passing as compared to male students. Thus in 1996 even though females constituted 67.1% of those enrolling their proportion in those passing out was just 29.5%. Similarly in 2002 while females constituted 63.4% of those enrolling their proportion in those passing out was just 31.6%. The proportions for the years in between are more or less the same. This means that there are a lot of women like Subhadra with a poor schooling background and unable to take admission in colleges which require regular attendance who are enrolling in IGNOU with the fond hope of getting a BA degree. However, the toughness

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of the course, the examination papers and their evaluation coupled with inadequate coaching are putting paid to their dreams leading to these women not being able to pass out.

No wonder then that these standard statistics regarding pass percentages, that are easily made available by most universities, are such a closely guarded secret in IGNOU and not readily disclosed to anyone. The dismal statistics mentioned above clearly indicate that IGNOU contrary to its professed mission has not disseminated knowledge through sustainable learning systems to the hitherto unreached. Not only has it failed to help the underprivileged students who have taken admission in the BA degree course to emerge as leaders and innovators of tomorrow but it has instead severely dented their self respect by making them into failures. This criminal negligence assumes an even more serious hue when we consider the fact that an overwhelming two-thirds majority of those aspiring and then failing to make something of themselves due to this insensitivity of IGNOU are women. What is most galling is that an institution that projects itself as the best distance learning university in the world does not have the honesty to review the continually deteriorating performance of its most basic BA degree programme.

After a long wait of eight months the appeal to Central Information Commission finally came up for hearing on 18th of December 2006. The Information Commissioner instead of taking the IGNOU PIO to task for not supplying the complete information and penalising him said that since he had given some information I should not be intolerant and should sit with the PIO and sort out the remaining differences. My argument that enrolment and pass statistics are basic information and the Information Commissioner should order IGNOU to put them up compulsorily on their website so that they would have to sit up and do something to improve matters as a result of public scrutiny of such a dismal performance cut no ice with the Information Commissioner who said that the staff of IGNOU were over worked anyway. I finally left in disgust leaving the IGNOU PIO and the Information Commissioner to their mutual backslapping. When this is the level of mendacity practiced by a premiere educational institution of higher learning set up specifically with the aim of helping the disadvantaged and the ineffectiveness of the RTI Act because of the tendency of bureaucrats to shield each other what hope is there for the adivasis and dalits and especially their women even with affirmative action legislated in their favour. Babasaheb Ambedkar must not just be turning but doing a few revolutions in his grave! Jai Bhim.

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