



3

Imagine there was no illiteracy

BIAS readers care. Or so I believe. That's why I am going to tell you all the things I know about the people and the organisations that are working in this city, for this city.

Let me start with Akshara Foundation, with which I am most familiar. Since early 2000, we have had only one mission: Every child in Bangalore in school and learning well.

How do we rack up after nearly six years? Well, the credit does not go to us alone but to dozens of NGOs working in primary education; to the city government and to the state government. But I am happy to say that 90% or more of our children are in school now compared to around 70% that many years ago. Enrolment is up, though retention is another issue altogether.

The ten percent who remain and the fresh migrants who come in every day, are still a concern. Yet, I think the success of combined efforts at enrollment reveal the special aspiration of every citizen. Education is the key to a better life.

And yet, all citizens do not have equal access to quality elementary education. There are multiple choices, of course, from completely free to ridiculously expensive. And we know where a third of the city's children go – into free government schools. And we know that far too many of these simply drop out of school.



Countries in the West have autonomous school boards that report to citizens and encourage participatory practices. Sure they have their share of problems, but at least these problems are aired and responses are required to be made



We believe it is because they are not 'learning well'. The responsibility for that rests squarely with the school administration.

Unlike other metros, we have not one, but two public school systems in Bangalore. There are over 1300 government schools in greater Bangalore that come under the jurisdiction of the state government. There are an excess of 100 corporation schools in Bangalore that come under the municipal corporation. This dichotomy has a history which is no longer relevant. In the government schools, the average spend per child is about Rs 3000 per annum. In the municipal schools, it is more than Rs 10,000. Yet, despite the tireless work of reform-minded NGOs, including Akshara, the amenities in both the school systems are simply not up to the expectations of parents.

It is time to involve the public in a debate on our schools. Can we have a great city without good schools? I just do not think so.

Perhaps the school system in the city needs to be managed through one authority. A responsive, compassionate authority, that is transparent and accountable in its operation. Many countries in the West have autonomous school boards that report to citizens and encourage participatory

practices. Sure they have their share of problems, but at least these problems are aired and responses are required to be made.

In Bangalore, neither the state government nor the municipality wishes to take on the other's burden. Everyone is happy and settled in the old way of doing things.

In the meanwhile, taxpayers have to go along with an ineffective delivery system where there is little accountability, either to the citizenry or to parents. And of course, it is the children who come out the worst, studying in ill equipped schools with demotivated teachers and little or no support systems to help them cope with a difficult and often irrelevant curriculum.

What can be done? Well, there are many models. We need to talk to find out what suits Bangalore best.

I am all for an educated debate on this. Let's work out a consensus on real reform in our public schools, to help realise the potential of every one of our young citizens. I have never met any child anywhere who has not had secret hopes of a better tomorrow. What is our legacy if not to make that as possible as possible?