Joy of Learning

by Veena Gokhale

Prem Dhurve, a primary school teacher in a village school in Madhya Pradesh, has to wade through a sea of mud to get to work in the monsoons. The school itself is a hut, where 30-odd children assemble soon after Dhurve arrives and rings an ancient-looking, clapper bell. Then Dhurve has the unenviable task of teaching these standard 1, 2 and 3 children simultaneously.

Incredibly, the children learn to master the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic). For the majority of them, this is the only education they will ever receive. The next school (standard 4 onwards) is a good half-an-hour walk from here, and most of the children are too poor and unmotivated to make it.

Dhurve's task has lightened somewhat since she started teaching a new curriculum. From, dull rate learning from prescribed textbooks, too high,-flown and irrelevant for the children to grasp, she now teaches from *Khushi Khushi*. This is a textbook full of games, imaginative exercises, funny verse, and short, easy to read lessons which use references a rural child in Madhya Pradesh is likely to be familiar with.

Khushi Khushi is just one of the many textbooks developed by ***Eklavya***, a unique non-government agency working to bring about a change in the Madhya Pradesh government's education system. Established in 1982, ***Eklavya*** has evolved and fostered three major programmes at the primary and middle school levels (standards 6, 7 and 8 are termed middle school in MP.) ***Eklavya' s*** oldest and most extensive effort, which predates the agency's formal inception, is the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP).

Learning made easier

The programme was developed in the early 1970s by a group of scientists, educationists and academics that were disenchanted with the existing science teaching methodology. They wanted children to learn science by conducting experiments, observing their surroundings and asking a lot of questions. The curriculum they developed consisted of a low-cost science kit and a workbook, which would make learning science a practical rather than theoretical exercise.

The science teaching programme was backed up with a teacher training component and had a built-in mechanism for delivering the kits, receiving feedback and evaluation. In the early 1980s, ***Eklavya*** inherited the HTSP from its parent organization, Kishor Bharati. Now it is available in all the government-run middle schools in Hoshangabad district and some others outside Hoshangabad, covering 425 schools in all.

Aiding the programme are ***Eklavya's*** publications like Hoshangabad Vigyan, chiefly aimed at teachers; *Srote*, a science features service in Hindi and *Chakmak*, a magazine for children. ***Eklavya*** also holds bal melas, that is, science fairs for children, and runs children's libraries.

Prashika (*Prathamik Shiksha Karyakram*) took ***Eklavya***, some five year ago, into the field of primary education. The group found that children entered middle school with poor math and language skills. *Prashika* aimed at remedying this problem through relevant, activity-oriented curriculum. *Khushi Khushi* was the happy result of their endeavours.

The *Prashika* textbooks are designed to bring about an all-round development with some regard given to the student's grasping power as s/he moves from standard 1 to 5. According to Subir Shukla who works with *Prashika*, "If three to five years of primary school education is all that a majority of people are going to get, we will have to start looking at exactly what they need to learn in that precious little time and how we can go about teaching it."

More recently, a sub-group of social scientists within ***Eklavya*** has developed a social science curriculum for middle school. Says Rashmi Paliwal, a member of the sub-group,

“The existing textbooks were compartmentalized and consisted of a compressed body of information. Their approach was mechanical, complex social or political concepts would be dismissed in a short paragraph. The language was too general.”

Eklavya adopted a more descriptive and imaginative approach, trying to create images of the past. The text was moulded by the belief that children need to understand social processes as also the interconnectedness of social and political phenomena within a geographical context, rather than take in a lot of undigested information. The lively, well-illustrated format makes these social science books a pleasure to read. The text is broken up with thought-provoking questions, which lead to interesting classroom discussions.

The teaching of geography posed a different kind of challenge. how to communicate the concept of "India", let along the world, to children who rarely travel beyond their own village? ***Eklavya*** started with local geography and laid emphasis on map-reading skills, which are neglected by the regular curriculum.

Breaking barriers

All the programmes have come up against problems: reluctant teachers, skeptical school principals and apprehensive parents, besides having to contend with infrastructural problems and social, political and economic impediments. The teachers had to be re-educated before they could impart any knowledge. One of the lessons they had to learn, and often the hard way, was to give up their traditional authoritarian role and become friendly and open with their students. They were amply rewarded for their "good behaviour" by the confidence, curiosity and expressive ability displayed by their students.

The battle however is not completely won and many doubts about the new programmes persist. It is felt that *Prashika* isn't helping the students learn the requisite math skills. That the science curriculum will turn out students who will not able to cope with regular textbooks from, standard 9 onwards. That the social science curriculum is too radical in the manner in which it discusses the caste system.

Some of these questions have been answered on the basis of concrete evidence. It has been found, through an actual survey, that students make the standard 8 to 9 (that is, middle school to higher secondary) transition quite smoothly. Other doubts only time can erase. In any case, the social science-programmes, currently running in nine schools, and *Prashika*, available in 25 schools, are at an experimental stage, particularly the latter. Overall, the group's intervention in the crucial and challenging idea of education has yielded positive results.

The HSTP is likely to be implemented all over the state over the next five years, with minor changes in the curriculum. The social science programme is also under review by the state government. ***Eklavya*** is funded by central government project funds, though both the central and state governments defray the cost of HSTP. The organization is also trying to raise some funds on its own, with *Chakmak* being a current profit-making venture.

Eklavya has shown that educational experiments need not remain elite, informal or small-scale and that the government too may be amenable to change. The agency's programmes could well provide a model for educational reform efforts in other lndian states.