

In memoriam

Anil Bordia 1934-2012



ONE can hardly think of an educational initiative launched by the Union government during the last quarter of the 20th century which did not carry Anil Bordia's mark. As a civil servant, he distinguished himself by identifying with the cause of educational reform, and then by redefining what governance in education might mean. He was an endearing man, exuding passion for his work and always keen to find ways to get things moving. He wore his status lightly, so lightly that a stranger might well feel confused on being told that Anil Bordia was a civil servant. There was nothing awkward or assembled about his modesty. One knew instantly that he cared. One of my vivid memories of him is from Kathgodam station. We were waiting for the Ranikhet Express and he was worried about the fact that the side berth I had been allotted would be too short for me. We spent the evening discussing how the railways cheat by charging the same price for a shorter, narrower space as they do for the longer, wider inner berths. He thought it would be a splendid case to fight in a consumer court, loss of sleep and convenience being the tip of the plea against a discriminatory fare policy.

Anil Bordia's personality and vision become somewhat graspable if we construct the ethos of Udaipur in the 1930s. Mohan Singh Mehta and K.L. Srimali are names that anyone familiar with the history of rural education in India would know. Anil Bordia attended the Vidya Bhawan school which was set up by Mehta and Srimali and of which his father, K.L. Bordia – who had joined after resigning from a college – was the headmaster. The school was symbolic of nationalist resistance to colonial education. It also represented the spirit of voluntarism that Gandhi had nurtured as a form of politics. Bridging the chasm between villages and towns, removal of social ills, spread of literacy and the dissemination of modern ideas and values were aspects of this legacy. Within the legacy however, there is a latent tension between western modernism and indigenous wisdom. In Rajasthan, the voluntary movement grew, so to say, on the strength of this tension. Adult education, in particular, provided significant popular ground for debates on what the term 'development' might mean.

Anil Bordia's outlook, his considerable international experience, and his stature shaped these debates in a manner that suggests how much farther his life's work went beyond his role as a committed civil servant. That society itself must visualize and articulate how it wants to change was axiomatic to the ideology of voluntarism; the

state's role was to facilitate the social forces involved in transformation. Details were important – and they often sharpened existing contradictions – but they were never perceived as important enough to be allowed to slow down or impede social fermentation. Between the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) that coincided with the Janata rule and the aftermath of the Emergency, and Lok Jumbish that encountered a crucial regime change during the 1990s, Anil Bordia's efforts to channelize the state's resources towards supporting social osmosis never flagged.

Many civil servants cherish the dream of reforming the system, but coping with its maintenance usually takes up all their energies. Anil Bordia had the rare privilege of putting the stamp of his vision on the system. This he did by shaping, first, the National Policy on Education and, a little later, reshaping it at some depth while drafting the Programme of Action (POA, 1992). The openings that both documents offered to non-formal initiatives in education brought a vast number of organizations – christened rather heartlessly, in the climate of the 1990s under a globally recognized label, as NGOs – into the fold of the state's responsibilities, releasing fresh energies but also enabling the state to withdraw. The Shiksha Karmi project in Rajasthan was meant to strengthen the rural school's relations with the local community, but the model soon mutated itself into a preference shown by state after state for para-teachers.

More than fifteen years later, Anil Bordia attempted to set the balance right by drafting a remarkable document which shows the way forward on the Right to Education (RTE) Act. The complexity involved in this task needs an explanation. The confidence that the enactment of an ambitious law like RTE required came from the success of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and its predecessor, the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). These programmes coincided with the emergence of Panchayati Raj institutions. DPEP and SSA greatly increased the system's enrolling capacity, but eroded the status of the teacher while leaving the old colonial outfit of the directorate untouched and isolated. RTE has now revived the hope that a new normative order shall prevail over chaos. How SSA – which is now its final stretch, or so it seems – might be harmonized with RTE is precisely the subject of the document that constitutes Anil Bordia's last major contribution to policy making. His health was failing, but he worked on this arduous, complicated task with the same indefatigable spirit that had inspired so many in the late 1970s, when he had guided NAEP, and in the late 1980s when he was shaping POA.

He joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1957 and the peak of his career coincided with an era in India's political economy which witnessed the rise and maturation of new kinds of social currents and forces. He recognized the change and harnessed the new social forces, partly out of his personal history but perhaps mainly because he had the imagination to assemble the alliances that could make a systemic

difference in his chosen field. Quite often it was not easy to distinguish the civil servant from the activist in him. The term 'activist' itself came into currency when the state's own character came under popular pressure following the 'emergency' the state had felt and promulgated in the mid-1970s. Like J.P. Naik, whom he admired, Bordia believed that the kinds of reforms education needed couldn't be imposed from above. He helped create inner spaces in the state for voluntary energies to be absorbed and new voices heard to make interpretive progress possible in the policy. He enabled non-state players to feel at home on the official turf by offering, in meetings and file notes, a playful, bold nudge to inertia.

It was not just his integrity and eye for detail that gave him unusual confidence to act on new ideas and to persuade others – including his political masters – to accept such ideas; it was also his personal association with an impressive number of individuals and groups whom he had involved in the task of shaping the new policy scenario of education. Of course, not everything worked out the way he wanted, especially in higher education. As secretary, he had to endure a prolonged strike by Delhi's college teachers and its outcome disturbed him. The statutory version of the National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) did not work. But in other areas, such as adult education – especially that of women – and the school system, Anil Bordia tirelessly encouraged a mind-boggling range of ideas and initiatives. Many of them, indirectly and often invisibly, allowed deeper creative forces that the system was used to ignoring, even crushing, to be released and accommodated.

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