**Decentralisation, participation and pedagogy: Learning for empowerment**

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It is an honour and a privilege to have been invited to give the key note address at this 2nd Anil Bordia memorial policy seminar on ‘People’s participation and decentralised educational governance’. I stand before you today with considerable humility, for I am aware that I am in the presence of several who knew the work of Anil Bordia much better than I, and are therefore rather more qualified to reflect on it. I first met Anil Bordia at the Jomtien conference in March 1990, and subsequently in the early 1990s at the Ministry of Education in Delhi when he was the Union Secretary of Education and I was working with the primary education project in Andhra Pradesh. I worked with him again in 1993, shortly after his retirement from the IAS and in his role as inspirational leader and Chair of the Lok Jumbish Parishad. At that time I was a member of a Lok Jumbish joint review team, working on behalf of the Government of Rajasthan, the Government of India and the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA)[[1]](#footnote-1). I met Anil Bordia last a few years ago when I was writing a monograph on the politics, policies and progress of access to elementary education, as part of NUEPA’s collaboration with the CREATE research consortium (Little, 2010).

In this paper do five things. First I reflect on the meanings of the two key terms underpinning our seminar – decentralisation and people’s participation; second I outline the historical context in which some of the most interesting Indian examples of decentralisation and people’s participation have occurred; third I outline the aspirations of the Lok Jumbish project in which Anil Bordia played a central role; fourth I evaluate some of the Lok Jumbish outcomes based on the available evaluation literature; and fifth I suggest that while our discussions of decentralisation and participation must focus on the role of community members in supporting the efforts of schools to attract and retain students and raise levels of achievement, we must also focus on the role of decentralisation and participation in the nature of interaction between teacher and student in the classroom. I will suggest that the nature of pedagogy lies at the core of Anil Bordia’s body of work for which he will be remembered.

**Decentralisation and people’s participation**

Decentralisation may be described simply as the transfer of authority from central to local bodies. It is customary to distinguish four types : deconcentration, delegation, devolution and privatisation (Rondinelli, Nelson and Cheema,1984). *Deconcentration* involves the smallest degree of transfer of authority: privatisation the greatest.Deconcentration spreads central authority without transferring the authority to decide rules to other bodies. For example a national government may establish offices for test administration in provincial capitals. This shifts authority for the implementation of the testing, but not the authority for decisions about test content . *Delegation* involves a shift in authority over rules and procedures concerning certain aspects of education but with responsibility still lying in the centre. Using the Mexican education decentralisation reforms of 1979 as an example, Mc Ginn and Walsh (1999) describe how representatives of the central Minister, known as delegates, were assigned to state or provincial capitals and given some authority over education. While the delegates consulted with state officials they remained responsible to the Central Minister. *Devolution*, by contrast, involves a transfer of decision making powers to local units of government. In the case of India, where, historically, control over education lay with the states, this has involved transfers of authority for decision making to *panchayat raj* bodies and the concomitant establishment of structures and some decision-making powers at the village level – village education committees, school management committees, parent-teacher associations. *Privatisation*, the fourth type of decentralisation, involves a substantial (though not complete) abrogation of responsibility for education by democratically elected bodies and transfer of financing from the state to households.

People’s participation in education can take many different forms. Many attempts at community participation have been ‘largely extractive in nature... money, materials, labour’ (Shaeffer, 1994: page 196). Others have involved communities in management or control; for example in needs diagnosis, the development and implementation of school policies, the design of educational content, or the delivery or evaluation of such content. These are often ‘seriously constrained, either because of the energies consumed in the community’s struggle for survival or because the school’s disinterest or resistance to community or parental involvement in what are often seen as specialised and professional matters’ (Shaeffer, 1994: page 196). Other constraintson community participation are heterogeneous communities with multiple interest groups, a history of united or conflictive relationships, high levels of poverty, fatalistic vs. optimistic attitudes, an unwillingness of local leaders to devolve some of their traditional authority to ordinary people, and a lack of informal and formal local organisations capable of effecting change.

# Background Context

Anil Bordia was one of several involved in the development of the landmark national policy on improving access to and the quality of education in 1986. The policy called for improvements in access to education of girls and women and for improvements in the quality of basic education for all, calls that were to be re-iterated in the policy review of 1992.

Over the years in India we have seen processes of both centralisation *and* decentralisation at work in the delivery of primary education. We have also seen an increase in the number of stakeholders. Until 1976 the central government contributed funding to the states through the planning commission process and provided annual incremental plan allocations. Responsibility for the interpretation and implementation of policy was devolved to the states. From 1977, implementation responsibility lay jointly *de jure* with the state *and* the centre, and, through the 1980s and the 1990s, central government gradually began to play a much more directive role in programmes for primary school development through the modality of *projects* which in turn promoted decentralisation strategies at the village level.

From the 1980s, and some years before the production of the 1986 national policy on education, a small number of foreign-funded projects, for example the Andhra Pradesh Primary Education Project (Ravi and Rao, 1994), and the Shiksha Karmi project (Mehti and Jain, 1994), designed to improve access and quality at primary education level, were initiated in various states. These would become the forerunners of the more extensive Lok Jumbish project, the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) of the 1990s and the country-wide *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) programme of the 2000s. The 1980s and 1990s were also a time when, in Anil Bordia’s own words ‘activist entreaties for women’s equality were being heard in all parts of the country’ (Bordia, 2000) and when domestic and international non government organisations were also becoming more actively involved in the implementation of educational programmes in partnership with and working under contract to government and other non government agencies. The involvement of many different groups working to improve access and the quality of education has created myriad constellations of deconcentrated, delegated, decentralised and privatised power relations between central government, state governments and non government partners.

Anil Bordia developed much of his insight about how to promote education from the grassroots with support from non government organisations from a small-scale project run during the 1970s by the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) in Tilonia, in which students in three experimental primary schools were taught by village youth who had trained at night schools to work as teachers. The experimental programme was expanded gradually to new sites with support from SWRC and other NGOs and the government of Rajasthan, and was expanded to become the Shiksha Karmi project in 1987 (Methi and Jain, 1994). One of the underlying drivers of the Shiksha Karmi project was the extremely low level of literacy in Rajasthan, a rate that was especially low among girls and women. As late as 1991, Rajasthan had the second lowest literacy rate in the entire country, 37%; and the lowest female literacy rate; 21% (Lok Jumbish Joint Assessment, 1993). The Shiksha Karmi project was a collaboration between the Governments of India and Sweden and the Government of Rajasthan. It sought to counter teacher absenteeism in remote schools, increase enrolment, especially among girls, and reduce dropout. The innovative strategies were the substitution of frequently absent primary school teachers by two *Shiksha Karmis* (educational workers) who resided in the villages where they taught across the grades of primary education, the establishment of residential training schools for the training of female *shiksha*, the involvement of village education committees in school decisions and the establishment of an autonomous society to manage project funds and provide flexibility and openness to innovation The formal head of the society was the State Secretary of Education (Ramachandran, 2015).

**The Lok Jumbish Project**

The first draft of the *Lok Jumbish* (People’s Movement) Project – appeared a few years later in 1988. Lok Jumbish sought to transform the mainstream system in Rajasthan rather than improve it by incremental reforms. The leaders of Lok Jumbish developed a politically radical strategy and complex design which saw the project as ‘developer, demonstrator, catalyst and transformer of the mainstream education system from the outside’ (Lok Jumbish Joint Assessment, 1993). Like the Shiksha Karmi project it attracted support from the Government of India, the Government of Rajasthan and the Government of Sweden, but on a much larger scale, and in the proportions 1:2:3. The Swedish government continued to fund the project until 1998 when, because of objections to India’s nuclear tests, it withdrew its support. After a hiatus, the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) stepped in and funded the programme until its closure in 2004.

Lok Jumbish had three major, overlapping components – the quality of learning, community involvement and the management of education (Figure 1). Although Figure 1 did not appear in early Lok Jumbish documents, it emerged through dialogue between the 1993 Joint Assessment ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ and provided the outsiders with a simple sketch map in which to locate Lok Jumbish practices and aspirations.

Figure 1 The Main Components of Lok Jumbish

The Programme for Community Mobilisation was radical and involved the mobilisation of the community through public debate, the sharing of information and knowledge to create informed decisions, and village household surveys to establish the numbers of children not attending schools and the reasons for non-attendance. Mobilisation involved, *inter alia,* the establishment in the village of a core group (*Prerak Dal*) who became the key activating agency within the village, the involvement of women’s groups in educational decision-making and the involvement of male and female adults in the design of school buildings, construction and maintenance. Members of the core group were identified and supported in their work by external mobilising agencies, non government organisations located at the Cluster (within the Block) level (e.g. The Women’s Development Programme, the Ajmer Adult Education Association, Sarva Seva Farms and Seva Mandir).

The Lok Jumbish management philosophy and modus operandi were also radical. Central to the management structure was the Lok Jumbish Parishad - a non-governmental agency chaired by Anil Bordia. The Lok Jumbish Parishad was registered in 1992 and assumed full powers to create positions and recruit staff, approve budgets and incur expenditures, and to frame regulations and by-laws for the implementation of activities. Considerable power over purpose, direction and implementation lay with the Parishad which co-opted a further 13 non government agencies at cluster level to work in villages with non government village committees. The management philosophy was founded on the belief that

for reviving the educational process, it is essential to re-establish the partnership between the parents, the child and the teacher. The value of the teacher needs to be restored by improving her ability to nurture skills and knowledge in the community and in the child. The deep rooted social and cultural factors that inhibit access to education among the socially backward communities need to be addressed. Processes and appropriate instruments that will create conditions for the equal participation of women in the system and thereby, increase access of education to girls need to be established. Thus Lok Jumbish is a significant departure from the norm, as it perceives education to be an integral part of social development (Lok Jumbish Joint Assessment, 1993:14).

Many lower level management structures were established including, inter alia, the core teams (Prerak Dal) and clusters mentioned already, building construct committees, women’s groups, village education committees and block level management committees.

The Quality of Learning component involved the training of teachers and teacher educators. It promoted a curriculum and pedagogic package of reforms shaped by the recently introduced the Minimum Learning Levels (MLL) that specified outcomes, and a system for professional support for teachers. The strategies adopted were not especially radical in themselves, even if they posed considerable challenges of implementation.

So to what extent were the aspirations realised?

**Community Participation**

Let us start with community participation. In Lok Jumbish grass roots people’s participation was considered a *sine qua non* of a social movement necessary to influence establishment policies and practices and to improve access to and the quality of basic education. In its early assessment of the community involvement component the Lok Jumbish joint assessment team of 1993 noted the need for more rigorous dialogue with community members about girls’ enrolment and attendance, especially those of low status, restricted access and those with security concerns and sibling care responsibilities.

A key element in the community participation approach was school mapping. As Govinda (1999( explains, Lok Jumbish school mapping differed in several ways from that practised elsewhere. As well as being used as a guide by centralised decision makers in locating schools in ways that balanced available resources and the demand for school places, Lok Jumbish used the school map to mobilise and articulate that demand. Instead of using the block or districts as a basic unit of the map, Lok Jumbish focussed on the village. Instead of the map being drawn by a local administrator (such as by a district education officer) Lok Jumbish school maps were drawn up by villagers who drew up action plans based on their diagnosis of need. The village core teams and women’s group members were central to the process of empowering village members and they in turn were trained for this work by the NGO community mobilising agency. The training was codified in a handbook and involved not only the creation of a map, but also a village education register with information on the education status of every child up to 14 years of age within households. This was intended to be used to track the progress of each child and to identify dropout and effect remedial action and the education records were held by the village.

Govinda’s overall evaluation of the school mapping process was that it had

brought the community members and primary education much closer together... has effectively broken the invisible barrier that existed between the government-sponsored primary education and the needs and aspirations of the rural community...(and has made) the participation of all children in primary education the social responsibility of the whole village (Govinda, 1999:159).

However, along the way a number of challenges were encountered. First, helping villagers to break their culture of silence and articulate their own ideas about education and other matters was no small task given the embedded social structure of rural Rajasthan. Second, handbooks that codify procedures for school mapping can ritualise the participatory process and rob it ‘of the essential vitality and spontaneity that characterises voluntary community participation’ (Govinda, 1999, p.155). Third, there were variations in the quality of the initial maps and registers, and even more variation in the quality of their maintenance and updating. Field functionaries encountered difficulties in reconciling enrolment and attendance figures in the school and the village education registers, and in identifying the children who were not enrolled in or attending school. Fourth, school teachers needed to become active partners in the construction of the village registers – but how could this be done without traditional community deference to the teacher undermining the active involvement of community members and placing them in a subordinate role?

**Management**

In its early assessment of the project in 1993 the Lok Jumbish Joint Assessment team recognised that work had started in the right direction and had created built-in mechanisms for self-reflection and self improvement. Concerns were raised about the overall management strategy and the integration of the project into the education mainstream in the longer term. There was no doubt that Lok Jumbish was already playing an effective role in developing, demonstrating and catalysing new approaches to access to education. However, ‘as LJ expands, the questions of mainstream integration in a manner which does not dilute the LJ philosophy, characteristics and work culture, will assume great importance’ (Lok Jumbish Joint Assessment, 1993, page 60). The integration would involve the adoption of the ideology, the activities at the cluster, block, district and state levels and a commitment to the recurrent costs. And while Anil Bordia repeatedly asserted to the 1993 team that his strategy was to influence the existing education system through system development, interaction and subsequently by absorption into the mainstream, this was easier said than done. The review team invited him to address, *inter alia*, how and where in the mainstream system will the field centres and their personnel be integrated? How should the functions and personnel of the block level be integrated? How will the strategy ensure that the resource units continue to be utilised in the mainstream system? Indeed, the team’s final recommendation was that a strategy for integration be tested as early as possible. After the establishment of a district structure Lok Jumbish could try, on an experimental basis, to integrate one fully fledged set-up into the mainstream education system in that district. As you know teams come and go and I had no opportunity to discover subsequently whether this recommendation was ever seriously considered by the Lok Jumbish Parishad. From what would happen subsequently I suspect it was not.

The issue of integration would remain a thorn in the side of Lok Jumbish throughout its life. In 2003 Vimala Ramachandran (2003) conducted an assessment of Lok Jumbish for the World Bank. In her report she asked whether the autonomous management nature of Lok Jumbish carried within in the seeds of self destruction. Notwithstanding the longer term commitment to integration expressed by the Lok Jumbish leadership back in 1993, she describes Lok Jumbish as ‘positioned as an entity outside the government, a programme that competed with and challenged mainstream structures....the identification of any large-scale programme with a few pioneers carries with it the promise of its own destruction, especially when these charismatic leaders/pioneers fail to create a sense of ownership in the mainstream’ (Ramachandran, 2003, page 26). Ramachandran’s assessment endorses some of the worries expressed ten years earlier – that absorption into the mainstream would not materialise.

But absorption of a kind did happen, less through its active promotion by the project itself and more through developments emerging beyond the state. The District Primary Education Programme which involved central coordination of primary education programmes across many states became the country-wide Shiksha Sarva Abhiyan 2004. The Lok Jumbish Parishad ceased to exist from 2004, all project staff came under the management of the block and district education officers and parallel systems under LJ ceased to exist. Nonetheless, as several of the chapters in this book will show, the SSA framework has adopted and adapted some of the philosophy and practices from Lok Jumbish as well as other Basic Education Projects.

**The Quality of Learning**

Finally I comment on the third component of the project on the Quality of Learning. Although I said earlier that the strategies adopted within quality of learning component were not in themselves radical, the education philosophy of pedagogy that underpinned them *was* radical, especially in the context of education in Rajasthan at that time. Discussions with the Lok Jumbish leadership in 1993 had suggested the following prescriptive elements of the philosophy:

* Educators should adopt participatory rather than authoritarian attitudes towards their learners
* Learning must begin from where learners are: educators need to anticipate where these starting points are
* Educators need to treat learners as possessing already a wealth of knowledge and need to show a degree of deference towards them
* Educators need to create the conditions in which learners can enjoy their learning
* Educators need to find ways of providing learning content that is relevant to the lives of learners
* Educators need to plan and organise material which promotes activity-based learning
* The choice of learning content and materials is guided by the goal of achieving ‘the minimum levels of learning’ prescribed by central government
* Educators feel positive about their work, adopt a constructive approach to innovation and education reform, feel positive towards the communities of the learners they teach, and acquire a sense of mission to transform the primary education system.

The themes of participation and decentralisation were necessarily central to the community participation and management components. Although the Lok Jumbish leadership did not explicitly link them to the quality of education component, a close reading of the aspired-to education philosophy outlined above suggest a shift towards increased participation and greater decentralisation in the interactions between teachers and students. The philosophy outlined an enhanced role for learners as agents of their own learning. The philosophy called for educators to adopt participatory rather than authoritarian attitudes towards their learners. But the philosophy also implied a shift in power, a devolution of power, away from the teacher and towards the learner. In principle learners were to have more opportunities to make their current level of knowledge apparent to the teacher, more opportunities to value the power of the learning they have and build on it, more opportunities to engage actively rather than passively in learning and more opportunities to provide the teachers with learning feedback which influences what she teaches next. At the same time the teacher was to have more opportunities to become a *facilitator* of learning rather than the sole authority for learning (Lok Jumbish Joint Assessment 2003).

In Lok Jumbish, as in most reforms of education, there were several sets of learners and teachers – not simply children and their teachers, but also teachers and their master trainers, NFE instructors and their master trainers, master trainers and resource persons. Did the implied devolution of power from teacher to learner manifest itself in the interactions between teachers and learners in the teacher training courses, in the training courses for NFE instructors or master trainers and resource persons, as well as in those between teachers and learners in school classrooms?

Very little evidence on Lok Jumbish pedagogy is available. Ramachandran, Pal and Mahajan (2004) provide some evidence from one of the Lok Jumbish sub components, the Balika Shikshan Shivir (BSS) programme. The BSS programme was a catch up programme for girls and young women, intended to bring the girls to a Grade 5 standard of learning in 7 months. The researchers report positively, that

Balika Shikshan Shivir has been able to achieve the near impossible, get girls out of defined roles, enable them to access education and give them a chance to re-claim a lost childhood. It has given young girls freedom (albeit for a short period) from the drudgery of work and sibling care.....we heard several cases of delayed Gauna (premarital ritual) and even marriage, no mean achievement in Rajasthan!... sending a few girls to school had a ripple effect; many more girls are now attending school. These young girls come back and cajole and bully their parents, neighbours and relatives to send their daughters to school... the most significant and tangible outcomes are the enhanced self-esteem and self confidence of the girls. As the children settle down... they transform slowly. This magic is palpable...the key to this is an atmosphere devoid of fear... the bonding between the children and the teachers is evident and perhaps one of the most beautiful aspects of the BSS process (Ramachandran et al (2004: xiii-xiv).

These very positive outcomes may be described as ‘incidental gains’. They were neither planned nor targeted in the formal project design.

But what about the BSS classroom pedagogy? Here the evidence is more disappointing. Ramachandran et al (2004) report that almost 30% of the seven month programme was devoted to preparation for formal examinations through memorisation of lessons and answers. And despite the participatory child-centred rhetoric, classroom pedagogy was didactic. There was little time for child-centred learning or group learning. Much time was spent on memorisation of questions and answers, multiplication tables, repeated drills and copying. The image was of a learner who ‘ follows teacher’s instructions, engaging in mechanical tasks of reading aloud and reciting multiplication tables in chorus and copying from the blackboard’ (Ramachandran, Pal and Mahojan, 2004**).** This is disappointing.

There is even less evidence on the impact of Lok Jumbish on learning outcomes.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have reflected on the experience of the path-breaking Lok Jumbish project. Three questions of relevance to the chapters in this book arise.

* From the past twenty five years of innovations in decentralisation and participation in basic education, what has been learned and adopted in the present, what has been forgotten and discarded, and what could have been learned but has not?
* What evidence is available on the impact of these basic education innovations on access and learning outcomes?
* And what evidence is there to suggest that the concepts of decentralisation and participation have percolated the pedagogy of teaching and learning in schools and training centres in programmes across the country?

This final question has particular importance, for it is in the interactions between learners and educators that learning takes place, that respect for the other is formed, that self esteem and self confidence are nurtured, and that a love of learning is established. If that love of learning can be sustained into the future then empowerment – the goal and passion so central to Anil Bordia’s work - will take place. As educators, the creation among our students of a love of learning throughout life remains our challenge.

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1. The Team was led by Gabor Bruszt of the ISO Swedish Management Group. The Indian members of the team were Ms Sujata Rao then IAS Joint Secretary, Dr Rukmini Rao of the Deccan Development Society, and the late Dr. M.M. Kappoor of NUEPA (then NIEPA), who was the first to introduce me to the school mapping approach then being developed within Lok Jumbish. The other members of the team Ms Cecilia Palmer of the ISO Swedish Management Group and myself. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)