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Rekindling the lamp of learning

Philip Chacko

The Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samithi is back on track with its social transformation crusade, a remarkable endeavour that has lifted 140 million Indians out of illiteracy

If India be the spawning ground for a million mutinies, it is also the wellspring of myriad revolutions, some shining and noisy, others earthy and unsung. The exertions and endeavours of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samithi (BGVS) to further the cause of literacy in India may lack in loudness and rhetoric, but that does not detract from an extraordinary story of zeal and commitment, of altruism and vision.

BGVS is the non-governmental organisation (NGO) that partnered the Indian government in carrying the lamp of learning to about 40,000 villages in some 250 districts across the length and breadth of the country. In the decade between 1989 and 1999, the period when BGVS reached its zenith, the organisation and its concepts were magnetic enough to attract more than 12 million entirely voluntary activists to its fold. More remarkably still, these messengers of hope managed to reach and teach close to 140 million illiterates.

Those glory days gave way to stagnation and retreat in the face of, among other realities, the changing socio-political landscape of India. But BGVS, whose full form translates into Indian Science and Knowledge Movement, is back on the march again — thanks in no small part to funding support from the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust — wiser and rejuvenated, able and willing to put its shoulder to the wheel of lifting India out of the illiteracy trap.

A slice of history is essential to understand the character and objectives of this most unusual of NGOs. BGVS traces its lineage to the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), set up in 1962 by a cluster of science writers with the aim of spreading the word on science and literature in Malayalam. Education was KSSP's focus in its early days, but it soon extended its wings to accommodate issues such as development, environment and health. The Parishad now has some 75,000 members (about 12,000 of them teachers), has published over 700 titles (among them the popular *Eureka*, a monthly magazine for schoolchildren), and, most importantly, has become a people's movement working for nothing less than social transformation.

In 1989, KSSP spearheaded the Kerala government's famous 'total literacy project' in Ernakulam district. This time-bound, area-specific campaign, with financial support from the National Literacy Mission, had clear targets that emphasised reading, writing and arithmetic. It drew 60,000-plus volunteers, embraced topics such as hygiene, child immunisation, cooperative farming and small savings, and employed local art forms, the print media and cinema to drive home the literacy idea. Ernakulam became the first fully literate district in the country, and the model for BGVS's pan-Indian initiative. That, though, would come later.

KSSP was the forerunner to and the inspiration for the mushrooming of the people's science movement (PSM) in the country. By the mid-1980s, a loose network of PSMs from different parts of India had congealed and started coordinating their efforts. A critical tool in KSSP's science-popularisation methodology is the *kala jatha*, or art caravan, a novel method of involving people, where ideas are propagated through travelling music and theatre groups. In 1987, three years after the Union Carbide gas disaster, 26 science movement chapters, including KSSP, got together to organise the Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha, which was a



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convergence in Bhopal of five different groups from five different directions.

This *jatha* was a landmark event and one of the sparks that led to the creation of the All India People's Science Network, which today has 40 organisations from 20 Indian states under its umbrella, is functional in 18,000 villages in over 300 districts, and counts teachers, students, scientists and professionals among its members. The Bhopal *jatha*, for which the Indian government's Department of Science and Technology allocated Rs 68 lakh, was also the precursor that crystallised the BGVS concept.

The late 1980s were the years of prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and his technology missions. His government was impressed enough by the Bhopal experiment to consider replicating the *jatha's* mass mobilisation theme in the field of literacy and expanding the canvas to cover all corners of India. The centre's Ministry of Human Resource Development started talking to constituents of the people's science movement and formulating a plan of action.

M. P. Parameswaran, a leading light of BGVS from its earliest days and currently its chairperson, was in thick of these deliberations. He recalls: "The government had its National Literacy Mission and that had its relevance. We argued the case for a parallel national literacy movement that would be powered by people, one that would complement the government's labours. Any all-India literacy undertaking could only be accomplished if these two worked together." Many rounds of discussions culminated in the decision to bring together the various people's science movements and the formation of a new NGO that would execute the Ernakulam archetype across the country.

In April 1989 BGVS came into existence with the late economist and educationist, Malcolm S Adiseshiah, as its founder-president, Dr Parameswaran as secretary, and a government grant of Rs 1.6 crore to get it going. BGVS's first general council comprised science movement activists, government representatives, educationists, social workers and artists. The initial phase was all about creating an ambience for literacy and laying the ground for a mass mobilisation of volunteers. "The idea at this point was not literacy per se, but placing the idea of education on the agenda in as many districts and villages as we could," says Dr Parameswaran.

The period from 1989 to 1993 marked a coming of age for BGVS. In 1990, designated international literacy year, it organised its maiden *jatha*, a massive programme aimed at seeding the literacy concept among people and creating the organisational infrastructure that would sustain its ensuing district campaigns. This, and the *jathas* of '92 and '93 that followed in its wake, were a novel experience for most villagers exposed to it. Popular cultural idioms and forms were the vehicle to convey the message linking literacy with livelihood and social problems. Women and rural youth were one of the mainstays of the movement; 'literacy ambassadors' were appointed in districts, and state coordinating units established.

These *jathas* positioned literacy on the national agenda. Their components were: a district-wide focus; socio-cultural mobilisation; the use of popular culture as a propagation tool; the creation of a decentralised organisational structure to spread implementation at the village level; and bringing together teachers and the learning community. The cornerstone of this model was volunteerism, at the teaching end, and its guiding principle was the people's movement model.

The 1990 *jatha* helped BGVS fine-tune its approach. The 1992 version concentrated on the Hindi-speaking belt of North India and the 1993 edition, called the *Samatha Jatha*, focused on women. Through the course of the *jathas*, BGVS cemented the voluntary ideal at the heart of its endeavours, stretched its organisational presence, and strengthened its infrastructure of 'district literacy committees'.

It was far from smooth sailing for BGVS. The casual complexities of crystallising such a complicated initiative aside, in the poorest districts the organisation came up against that old brick wall of education taking a back seat to everyday survival. In the years between 1994 and 1997, BGVS pushed to place literacy in the context of a host of development

issues and factors: health and sanitation, food and water, *panchayati raj*, natural resources, women's empowerment, etc. Despite the change of tack, BGVS was entering a period of regression, accentuated by an erosion of its relationship with government agencies.

Differences of opinion on strategy and implementation with the government agencies involved in the literacy drive had a debilitating effect on BGVS. With financial backing from the government, its bulwark till now, steadily declining, the organisation was forced to scale down its operations and, to some extent, reinvent itself. From about 1998 the organisation began a process of drastic decentralisation while preferring to concentrate its activities in select villages within district blocks, and integrate its basic literacy, post-literacy and continuing-literacy phases.

By 2002, after plenty of internal debate and disagreements, BGVS came to the decision that it needed resources from sources other than the government. That began the process which eventually climaxed in the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust bestowing a grant of Rs 10 crore, to be given in three parts over as many years: Rs 2.5 crore in the first year, Rs 3.5 crore in the second, and Rs 4 crore in the third. The Trust's grant, Rs 1.5 crore of which has already been delivered, will enable BGVS to devote resources to training and capacity building in 20 states; develop and invigorate its volunteer cadres in villages; and fortify its strategies and operations in areas such as basic education, adult and continuing literacy, livelihoods, health and women's empowerment

Denzil Saldanha, a professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, reckons BGVS was one of the big reasons why India was able to increase its literacy rate by 13.37 per cent between 1991 and 2001, from 51.63 to 65.38 per cent. Writing in a voluminous report on the organisation and its contributions, he states: "BGVS stands today as a major social movement. ... This in some ways constitutes a unique formation within civil society."

In Dr Parameswaran's opinion, the BGVS crusade was the largest mass mobilisation by an NGO that has happened in the country, but his greatest learning from the experience has nothing to do with numbers. "Our volunteers came without expecting any rewards, except the joy of giving and teaching, and doing good for India," he says. "That message of the this movement is that the essential goodness of our people has not been disturbed. There's still hope for India." BGVS is back on track to transform the hope of literacy into reality.

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