

Computers to schools

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IT BEGAN as a dream, but ended — or rather, continues — as a government project. Here is one perspective on the attempt to take computers to schools in Goa and on how volunteerism in the project got side-tracked, and what it sometimes implies when governments enter such ventures.

It was in the mid-nineties that the impact of computers was getting noticed more widely in the smaller and remote parts of India. Rajiv Gandhi's initial ventures were gone by more than a decade. Now, computers were going beyond the metros.

Goa, as most readers would know, is a former Portuguese colony on the west coast of the Indian subcontinent (population approx 1.4 million, area 3700 sq.km). It is better known to the rest of India as a fairly laid-back beach-holiday centre.

But even here ideas have their way of spreading. They only need a seed.

A handful of IT professionals and schools in this somewhat more affluent (by Indian standards) state began to look at the possibilities of taking computers to the classroom.

Most of Goa's schools are privately run with government grants that just cover the teachers salaries and a little more for maintenance. So, where does computer hardware come from, even if software can be 'pirated'? Fortunately, the once-used computer market was just beginning to open up around this time. In addition, if you believe in the innovativeness of the human mind, such problems tend to find their own solutions.

The Lourdes Convent in Saligao village, a fairly middle-of-the-road school, neither an elitist nor a deprived remote rural school, approached a local professional, who made a donation. Unaware of such efforts, another school, the SFX Girls High School, one of the less-affluent schools from the North Goa town of Mapusa, was

making efforts of its own. Through an enthusiastic teacher Jude Miranda, it managed well to raise funds through raffles and donations from a couple of overseas tourist friends. Every trick in the book was tried out. Successfully enough for the PCs to get into a classroom converted into a computer lab.

Of course, these were just two from some 300+ secondary schools in the state. But there were signs that the idea was catching on. Some voluntary initiatives focussed on the Bal Bharati Vidyamandir at Ribandar, on the outskirts of state-capital Panjim.

Parents, eager to ensure that their children could lay their hands on this “magical” technological wonder, were exerting pressure. Never mind if too many students crowded around three or four computers in the school lab that they could hope to visit, at best, maybe once a week. Never mind that no one really had a clear idea of how a computer could really be used in education. Or how it would help. Schools here are faced by a situation where, unlike the big Indian metros, one doesn't have to queue up to gain admission. On the contrary, schools here need to vie for students. This means that many schools realised that having computers could be a unique selling point in the race to gain students.

Something less pleasant, but true: some schools realised they could actually earn a little revenue, by charging students about Rs 25 or so monthly. (Private schools are allowed to charge prescribed and fairly low fees for tuition in a few classes here, while state subsidies cover running expenses. Education is free in the state-run schools and in many classes in state-subsidised, but privately-run schools.)

Other things began happening almost in parallel: the Computer Society of India (Goa chapter) got interested in the computers-in-schools initiative. A local website offered sponsorship for prizes. Using

the Net, an expat network spanning many continents got excited by the whole possibility. But voluntarism has its limits. Even if all these initiatives had to succeed, it would have taken time and grown slowly.

So, the government stepped in. Tentative steps in this direction were already there though, for short time. Members of Parliament took a few computers to schools under the contentious MP's Local Area Development scheme (which allows parliamentarians to spend ten million rupees in their home constituency on priorities of their own). This meant large, jumbo-sized dot-matrix printers entering village schools which otherwise lacked the basics. It also resulted in dealers cheating on hardware supplies, and telling schools that they could not even open their PCs to check during the first year, if the warranty on hardware was not to be void.

All the same, it also resulted in a few schools getting PCs. Never mind if the giving was done simply for the sake of giving (or, should one say, spending), and the beneficiaries were not in a position to make most of the PCs. Never mind if the computers were spread so thinly that some schools just got one or two — adorning principal's office like the trophy of a proud hunter. So, at one level, the link between initiative and reward, in terms of getting the computers, was broken.

Soon, the official involvement became more apparent. One fine day, the previous Congress government roped in an agency having a monopoly to conduct computer training in schools across the state. Schools that had struggled to find a teacher and arrange the monetary resources, outside the government allocated funds, to pay him suddenly found his work redundant. They were simultaneously saddled with a teacher, who, for obvious business reasons often tended to be lowly-paid, poorly motivated and unhelpful.

On another level, schools that were willing to shift from proprietary software to free software found themselves hamstrung by the syllabi of the state-run Goa Board of Education. It insisted to teach Microsoft products as part of the syllabi. Oddly enough, the products specified were those which were no longer marketed by the dominant player in the proprietary software world. Further, the schools were

not capable of affording the legal copies of such specified products.

Repeated attempts to change the syllabi to a vendor-neutral one, proved futile. Educationists claimed they had deleted references that recommended particular companies; these references made a mysterious comeback in the actual syllabus.

As if not to be outdone, the BJP government in the state — headed by an otherwise tech-savvy IIT alumni, Manohar Parrikar — undertook its own controversial IT-in-schools initiative. Earlier, the hardware tender for major contract went, amidst a lot of controversy, to a party supporter. The opposition raised angry charges, but like many contentious contracts in Goa, this went unhindered.

More recently, after a series of pro-Free Software statements from chief minister Manohar Parrikar and the former IT minister, the state moved ahead and spent ten million rupees (Rs 1 crore) for proprietary software including an office suite and Operating System that would allow students to use PCs merely as glorified typewriters and Internet/email nodes, when literally thousands of more useful applications doing a plethora of tasks are available for free. The students made the excuse that the latter was difficult to use!

This software, incidentally, was taken to implement another much publicised government scheme. Called the 'Cyberage scheme', this has some good features, but on the whole seems badly misconceived.

Under this scheme, eleventh standard Science students are to get a PC virtually free, paying a nominal sum of a thousand rupees, to spread the PC culture across the state, literally to every corner of Goa.

Is this logic sound? Computer professionals in the state have asked whether it would not make more sense to hand out PCs to schools, to be used collectively. If these are to be given out to individuals, why not to engineering students? Why not to teachers who could use them productively? Then, there are other questions: how does one protect against misuse? Have the computers been delivered as promised, and on schedule? Do eleventh standard science students, facing a competitive exam in a year, have the time for it? Why should affluent students be given almost-free computers by a state otherwise struggling to

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meet its educational budget? How does one ensure the students are not taking the computers merely because they're cheap? Wouldn't interest-free loans ensure that only really serious students get them?

So, in less than a decade, the state's involvement in taking computers to schools has enabled citizens to become passive, helpless recipients waiting for this magical tool to fall out of their skies into their laps! In the interim, the network of expats, mentioned earlier, got activated enough to ship in two container-loads of once-used PCs. Whether these are useful and serviceable over time has been debated. But, that apart, the first container got delayed many months, as Customs regulations blocked their import, even though aimed at a clearly not-for-profit purpose. In the second shipment, the expat team partnered with the Goa government's education department expediting Customs clearance. But, in turn, politicians extracted their pound of flesh, and ensured that some PCs went to schools of their choice (in their constituencies, naturally), many of whom were not prepared for the idea or its implementation.

Is this a dream gone sour? This writer is no proponent of the neo-liberal ideology that says, the state's role should be minimised in every sphere of life. But the best of ideas can obviously run aground, or get badly subverted, if implemented without honesty of purpose and foresight. Taking computers to schools in Goa is a good example. Are our planners listening? ■