of students is sufficient for admission into other schools, parents are not required to get TCs to admit their children into neighbouring government schools. "BPS in the state are facing a serious crisis. There was negligible fees collection in 2020-21 as many parents didn't pay fees because of financial difficulties and others don't want to pay for virtual classes. With depleted revenue, we can't pay our teachers. In 2019-20, we had 60-65 teachers and now that number is half," she says.

But while Tamil Nadu's newly elected DMK government is pulling out all the stops to fill up government schools taking advantage of the Covid pandemic, it's a moot point if the public interest is being served. With all 37,217 government schools still shuttered, the only remote lessons being provided to their 6.7 million children, is through Kalvi TV, the state government-run television channel. The learning outcomes of children passively learning from one-way lectures are worse than before.

**Shivani Chaturvedi** (Chennai)

▸ **MADHYA PRADESH**

## Politics of happiness

EVIDENTLY INSPIRED BY THE EXAMPLE of the neighbouring Kingdom of Bhutan which measures national development through a Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI) and latterly by the Delhi state government which introduced happiness classes into the curricula of government schools, the Anand Vibhag (Happiness Department) of the Madhya Pradesh government has succeeded in ameliorating some of the Covid pandemic's gloom and doom pervading the country's geographically second-largest (308,245 sq. km) state (pop.73 million) by extending the ambit of the Happiness Department to the education sector.

First introduced by incumbent chief minister Shivraj Chauhan in 2016 to spread loosely defined happiness through narration of motivational stories, yoga and mental health advice to rural communities, the department was transformed into the Spiritual Department by the Kamal Nath-led Congress government which was voted into office in 2018. Until March 2020, the focus of the Spiritual Department was to promote inter-communal and religious harmony.

However, when the BJP was voted back to power in Bhopal in 2020 after engineering dramatic defections from the Congress, the Happiness Department with a less secular flavour was restored with the mission to uplift the spirits of the people of the state. In 2020 Aloha, an internationally accredited happiness programme, was translated into Hindi and incorporated into the Happiness programmes. Currently, the happiness programme is being disseminated in all 53 districts of the state by 55,000 unpaid volunteers.

During the past pandemic year, the department has conducted 100,000 twice-a-week online happiness programmes. The programmes are supervised by the Rajya Anand Sansthan, an autonomous body constituted to promote the department's objectives. The board members of the Sansthan are eminent citizens working in the areas of culture, society, psychology and academics.

"Education was one area that was left untouched by the department, so we decided to sensitise education institutions to the need for happiness, mental peace and well-being, especially in the pandemic era. Therefore for the past one year, introductory programmes have been conducted for school and higher education students in all 53 administrative blocks. Our programmes are not restricted to government institutions and are open to all. They are charged a nominal amount of Rs.200 as registration fees to meet tea-break expenses," says Akhilesh Argul, chief executive of the Rajya Anand Sansthan.


The initial reaction to the happiness programmes being introduced in education institutions —especially in this grim pandemic era —is positive. "The department's volunteers conducted two programmes for our faculty spread over February and March this year. The programmes included an inaugural prayer followed by yoga classes and interactive sessions with volunteers selected by the education ministry narrating motivational stories and providing pandemic management advice, group singing and poetry recitations. The happiness programmes conducted online, have undoubtedly helped our faculty to de-stress, refreshed our spirits and diverted attention from the pain points of the pandemic. I'm sure once normalcy is restored and the programmes are conducted on campus, they will be more rewarding," says Dr. Pratibha Singh, principal of the Sarojini Naidu Govt. Girls Postgrad Autonomous College, Bhopal, which has an aggregate enrolment of 5,629 women students mentored by 111 faculty.

Although the Happiness Department's introductory programmes in education institutions have been welcomed, sceptical academics and opposition parties discern clever design behind this initiative. "It is pertinent to note this programme is conducted by unpaid volunteers who are likely to be BJP and RSS foot soldiers. The design is to introduce *hindutva* tenets and lifestyles into local communities and education institutions. The BJP claims it is the world's largest political party, larger than the 100 million Chinese Communist Party. The happiness programmes are part of its agenda to increase its membership," says a Bhopal-based academic, who preferred to remain anonymous.

Yet the moot point is whether politics and happiness can mix. Most academics believe they are mutually exclusive.

**Aditi Maheshwari** (Bhopal)

▸ **KARNATAKA**

# Wrong priority

EVEN AS THE NEW ACADEMIC YEAR 2021-22 commenced from July 1 with online education decreed compulsory for all of Karnataka's 76,800 schools including 48,393 government primary-secondaries, the stalemate over fees payable to private schools for 2020-21 and the new academic year is unresolve.

In February, several private schools associations filed writ petitions in the Karnataka high court contesting the constitutional validity of a January 29 state government directive to all private schools — including schools affiliated with pan-India CBSE and CISCE exam boards — statewide to collect only 70 percent of tuition (and no other) fees for the academic year ended April 2021.

This directive was issued after parents' associations contended that private schools' fees should be reduced because online classes are of shorter duration and schools are not providing co-curricular and sports education. Moreover, parents claim they have suffered loss of income and often employment during the pandemic year.

On June 29, the state government made a plea to the Karnataka high

**Shashi Kumar: precarious condition**

court seeking permission to constitute a panel headed by a retired high court judge to determine fees for all categories of private schools in the state for the new academic year 2021-22, and to "grant it liberty" to initiate action against private schools disregarding the January 29 fees restriction order.

Responding, private schools associations' counsel argued before a single judge bench that the state government lacks legal authority to regulate fees of unaided private schools and highlighted that, while on one hand, the government had decreed a reduced fee it had simultaneously directed all private school managements to pay full salaries to teachers and staff. After hearing both parties, Justice Magadum adjourned the hearing to July 22.

With a second Covid-19 pandemic wave having pushed the state into a 46-day industry and business lockdown in May-June, parents associations have upped their ante and demanded that the state government applies the 70 percent of tuition-fee-only order to the new academic year as well, and constitute a school fees adjudication committee.

"Most extra-curricular and sports activities have been halted since classes went online and schools have saved on these expenses. Private school managements can meet their teachers and staff wage bill by collecting 70 percent of annual fees. We demand that the state government immediately constitute a fees fixation committee headed by a retired high court judge to resolve this issue," says B.N. Yogananda, general secretary, RTE Students & Parents Association (RTE-STUPA).

On the other hand, spokespersons of the state's 21,000 private unaided schools say that 30-40 percent of parents have not paid their children's fees for the past year 2020-21, and fees arrears owing to private schools have accumulated to a massive Rs.4,000-5,000 crore. They contend that private schools, especially affordable budget private schools (BPS), are on the brink of financial bankruptcy with most unable to pay teachers and staff. They warn that over 3,000 BPS will have to shut down permanently if the restrictive 70 percent tuition fee order is extended to 2021-22.

"Taking advantage of the pandemic, the government first stopped all private schools from raising annual fees by the conventional 10-15 percent. Next in January 2021, it issued the 70 percent tuition fees directive applicable to 2020-21. Now it wants to set up a fees fixation committee to interfere with parent-management contracts. More than 30 percent of parents have not paid even the reduced 70 percent tuition fees due for 2020-21. In such a situation how can private school managements afford to provide online education and pay teachers and staff?" queries D. Shashi Kumar, general secretary of the Associated Managements of Primary and Secondary Schools in Karnataka (KAMS, estb.1989), which has a membership of 3,900 mainly budget private schools.

According to Kumar, in a landmark judgement delivered on May 3 in *Indian School Jodhpur & Ors. vs. State Government of Rajasthan*, the Supreme Court struck down a similar private schools fees reduction order of the Rajasthan state government, ruling that the right to determine