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## The idea of KISS

A schooling initiative in Bhubaneswar doesn't leave it to government, seeks to be the change agent



**BIBEK DEBROY**

IN A FAIRY tale, a kiss turned a frog into a prince. Recently, I was fortunate enough to visit KISS (Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences) in Bhubaneswar. Most people have heard of KISS and Achyuta Samanta (the founder of KISS and KIIT — Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology), or should have. While there is a KISS International School with some international students, the core is the regular KISS school and the associated KISS college for higher education. KISS was started in 1993 with 125 tribal students and some financial support from the ministry of tribal affairs.

Today, there are 25,000 tribal students, from 62 poor tribal communities (13 primitive tribal groups). Most, though not all, are from Odisha. For these students, who are poor and first-generation learners, education is free, from kindergarten to postgraduation. Since schooling is residential, board, lodging and healthcare are also free. Compared to many schools, private as well as public, the KISS track record is rather good — gender ratio, retention rates, pass percentages, integration of vocational education, sports and extra-curricular activities. More specifically, the school has 19,057 students — 9,044 girls and 10,013 boys. The college has 5,994 students — 3,204 girls and 2,790 boys. As news about KISS spread in the deprived and disadvantaged catchment area (Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh), there has been demand for enrolment in it. I was told there are around 50,000 applicants, even after filtering for poverty.

But there is a reason for that cap of 25,000. This is primarily a private-cum-social initiative, with limited money received from governments, Union or state. When rice is provided by the Odisha government, it is at APL (above poverty line) and not BPL (below poverty line) rates. Most land (80 acres, 1.5 million square feet of built-up area) has been privately acquired, from villagers. The only exception seems to be some land given on a lease basis to KIIT (one of its wings), but not to KISS. This land was part of the Chandaka Industrial Estate. That never took off. There were sick industries and plots of unutilised land lying around. Hence, Odisha's Industrial Infrastructure Development Corporation handed over some of this land to educational institutions, KIIT being one.

Since there are no doles and handouts from outside, the KISS model works only if there is internal cross-subsidisation. And that happens to be with KIIT, which was set up in 1992 with Rs 5,000 in funding. But that expansion of the acronym — Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology — is in the past. Since 2004, KIIT has been a university, having taken the deemed univer-

sity route. KIIT University now has 11 different schools, spread over 400 acres and with 20,000 students. Note that all these courses, undergraduate and postgraduate, are "professional". You won't go to KIIT University and study the liberal arts.

Other than the human resource development ministry, the University Grants Commission and the All India Council for Technical Education, assorted newspapers and magazines rate educational institutions. Let's not get into that. For the same university, ranks can also vary across different schools. KIIT University isn't at the very top. (It is certainly more difficult to attract good faculty to Bhubaneswar. Any good product from an educational institution is the result of faculty, learning from peers and tight entry criteria.) But it is rapidly moving towards the top, especially in the eastern region, and given its relative youth, its climb up the rankings is remarkable.

Without KIIT, KISS cannot exist, and that has to do with the innovative way in which the latter is financed. Five per cent of KIIT's turnover is mandatorily donated to KISS, like CSR funds. "Profits" from KIIT are ploughed into KISS. Every KIIT employee contributes 3 per cent of gross salary towards KISS. Any vendor or contractor that supplies KIIT has to mandatorily contribute 2 to 3 per cent of profits to KISS. Vocational products produced in KISS as outcomes of vocational training also fetch some money. (Students retain 50 per cent of profits from the sale of such products.) Finally, there is the channel of pure charitable donations. These multiple methods are enough to sustain KISS, and it works far better than public subsidies through financing, or even direct public provisioning (think of government schools, colleges and universities).

Why not replicate KISS elsewhere? For the record, KISS does plan to set up branches in all 30 of Odisha's districts, in 10 states and 10 countries (with two branches in Bangladesh). Since 2013, there has been a KISS school in Delhi (Najafgarh), with 1,200 students, as a joint venture between KISS and the National Capital Territory government. A KISS school is about to start in Ranchi. But all these will perforce deviate from the original Bhubaneswar model of using KIIT to cross-subsidise KISS. It isn't that easy to replicate KIIT everywhere, and that is the intent, either. Therefore, the other KISS initiatives will have to be supported by state (or other) governments, for land, building infrastructure and running expenses. None of those requirements is significant compared to the huge sums of money governments spend on education, with limited gains.

Nevertheless, the original Bhubaneswar idea appeals much more. Someone had the foresight to say: I don't want to go to the government with a begging bowl. Let me see what I can do, individually and collectively. Let me be the change agent, instead of perpetually asking governments to do something. I don't expect governments to establish temples to Lakshmi and Saraswati. That's why KISS is precious.

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Views are personal