

# THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS

## A KISS of change

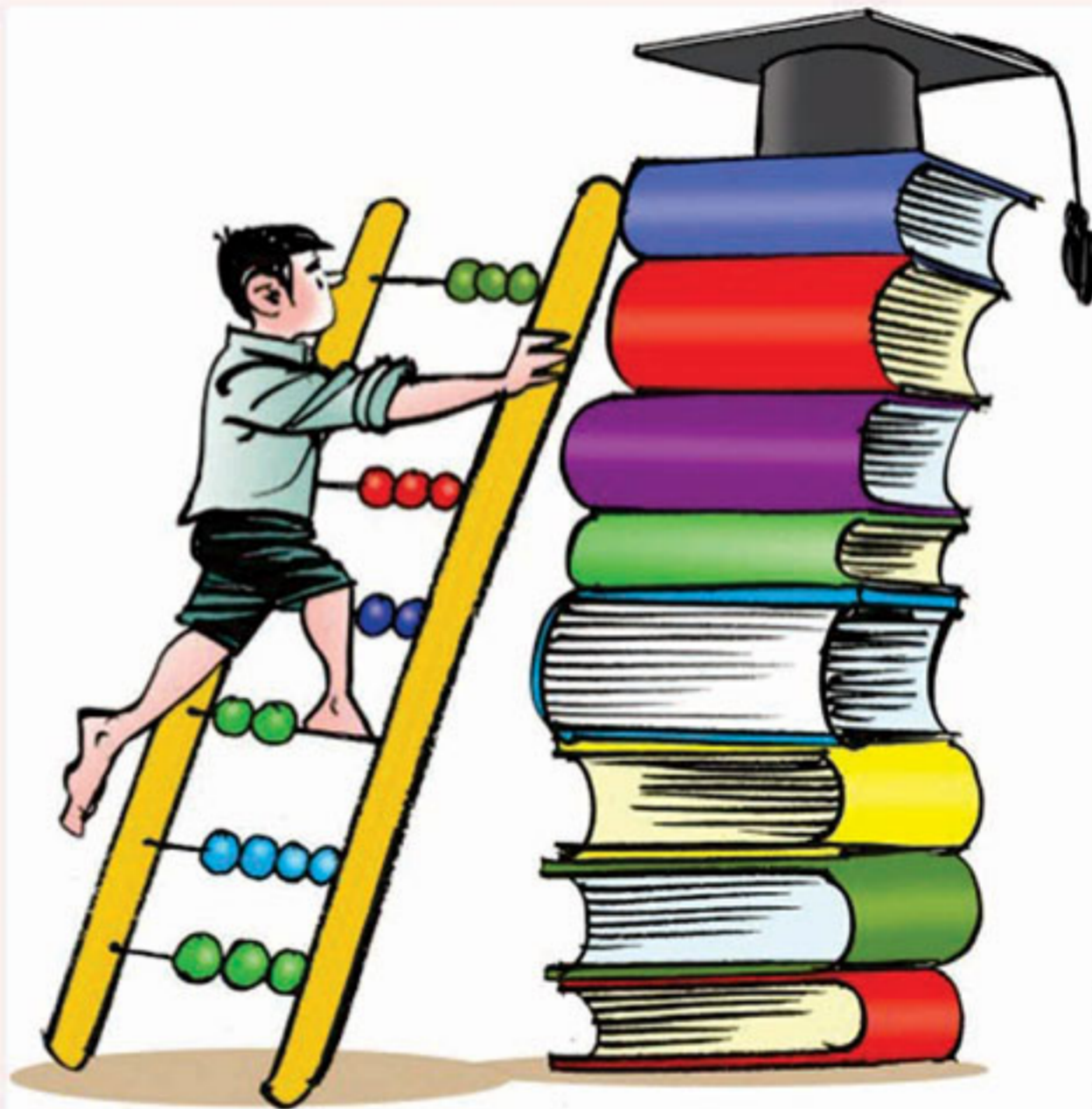
The Bhubaneswar-based school demonstrates how tribal lives are being transformed without any government aid



**BIBEK DEBROY**

In a popular fairy tale, a kiss turns a frog into a prince. Recently, I was fortunate enough to visit Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), in Bhubaneswar. Most people have heard of KISS and Achyuta Samanta (the founder of KISS and KIIT), or should have. While there is a KIIT 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 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 post-graduation. 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, Chhattisgarh), there has been demand for enrolment in KISS. 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 very limited money received from governments, Union or state. While rice is provided by the state government, this is at APL (above poverty line), not BPL (below the poverty line) rates. Most land (80 acres, 1.5 million sq. ft. of built up area) has been privately acquired, from villagers. The only exception seems to be some land given on lease basis to KIIT (one of its



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wings), 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 (IDCO) 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 from KIIT (Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology), set up in 1992 with ₹5,000. But that expansion of the acronym was in the past. Since 2004, KIIT has been a university, having first taken the deemed university route. KIIT University now has eleven different schools, spread over 400 acres and with 20,000 students. Note that all these

courses, under-graduate and post-graduate, are "professional". You won't go to KIIT University and study liberal arts.

Other than the HRD ministry, UGC and AICTE, 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, the climb up the rankings is remarkable. Without KIIT, there can't be KISS and that has to do with the innovative way of financing KISS—5%

of KIIT's turnover is mandatorily donated to KISS, like CSR. "Profits" from KIIT are ploughed into KISS. Every employee of KIIT contributes 3% of gross salary towards KISS. Any vendor or contractor who supplies to KIIT has to mandatorily contribute 2-3% of profits to KISS. Vocational products produced in KISS, as outcome of vocational training, fetch some money. (Students retain 50% of profits from 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, ignoring the problem of an inability to clone Achyuta Samanta? For the record, KISS does plan to set up branches in all 30 of Odisha's districts, in 10 states and 10 countries (2 branches in Bangladesh). Since 2013, there has been a KISS school in Delhi (Najafgarh), with 1,200 students, as a JV between KISS and NCT (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 isn't intended either. Therefore, such other KISS initiatives will have to be supported by state (or other) governments, for land, for building infrastructure and for running expenses. None of those requirements are significant, compared to huge sums of money governments spend on education, with limited gains. Nevertheless, that original Bhubaneswar idea appeals to me much more. (I haven't told you about Achyuta Samanta's antecedents. It is quite a story.) 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 Sarasvati. That's the reason KISS is precious.

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