

Report

SPREADING EDUCATION AMONG GIRLS IN RURAL AREAS

Experiences of Project Phulwari, Uttar Pradesh

**MANAVODAYA
Institute of Participatory Development**

Lucknow

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

To be born a girl in a poor family in rural Uttar Pradesh is an extreme form of deprivation one can experience - economically, socially and emotionally. Her education and mental growth is restricted due to several social and economic reasons. Accordingly the process of education has to be seen beyond just books and teachers. Education has to be made relevant to her needs and has to be organised with the participation of the community.

According to the International Commission on the Development of Education, mass spread of education " will only be possible if we succeed in shaking off the dogmas of conventional pedagogy, if free and permanent dialogue is set up within the educational process, if this enhances individual awareness of life, if learners are guided towards self-education". Also that " action must be taken..... not just by ministerial decision or decrees, but by the community at large, so that all those involved in the future of education : Users, practitioners and promoters..... are brought together and carried along.....".

The present project on Girls' Education has been designed to meet the above challenge. The focus remains on the girl child in rural areas, as the girl child continues to be the most neglected segment of the population. In doing so, however, the project has attempted to involve the community at every stage. Promotion of community institutions, awareness and education have, therefore, been an integral component of the project.

Girls' Education in Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh is categorised as one of the educationally most backward states of India, having a total literacy percentage of 41.6. Of this, the rural literacy rate is only 23%, while the female rural literacy rate is just 17%.

The neglect of education, particularly those of girls, has strong roots in poverty and tradition. The girl child is considered a liability that becomes another person's possession after marriage. Child marriages are rampant. In Sitapur region, most girls are married off in the age group 10 to 14. Till then they have important responsibilities in domestic chores like taking care of younger children, assistance in cooking, etc. Meanwhile the boys are free to go to school and play. The whole family also assists in agricultural operations when necessary. There is very low literacy among adults too. Given such a situation, there are very few families that make special efforts to see that their girl child is educated.

Getting the girls to school has, therefore, been an uphill task made possible essentially through mobilisation of people, awareness raising and sharing of responsibilities with people's groups.

Education and Awareness : Two sides of the Same Coin

As observed in many parts of Uttar Pradesh, education takes on a low priority among the rural poor. This is essentially because of the struggle for existence in a society having strong internal contradictions- a strong feudal character that works against the interests of the poor, a high degree of caste factionalism, subjugation of women and an ever increasing population. The problem is compounded by the prevalent subsidy culture in most government development programmes. The people continue to believe that development will come as a gift from the government.

The principal task for development agencies then is to reverse this notion and spread awareness among the poor regarding a process of development that builds on mobilisation of their own resources. To gradually enable them to develop capacity for collective analysis and action in relation to various problems facing them. This is a slow process that needs proper facilitation and should be strengthened through enhanced literacy and education for improved living conditions.

In the context of lives of the poor, we thus see that education and awareness are two sides of the same coin. Our experience in the girls education project confirms the same and is presented in some detail ahead.

Evolution of the Project

The project grew out of a need from ongoing activities of Manavodaya in district Sitapur, where the girls from poor families were found to constitute the most deprived lot. When a few experimental schools were started in the region in the early nineties, the attendance of girls was found to be very poor. It was gradually learnt that

- a. In some families the girls were not even counted, when asked to tell about their children.
- b. Little attention was paid to their health, hygiene & education.

- c. Most of them were confined to the homes looking after routine domestic chores including care of children.
- d. They were usually married at an early age leaving little scope for individual development.

It was, therefore, proposed to start education centres in different villages for girls in the age group 8 and above. It was proposed that the centres would be organised with the help of villager's Self Help Groups. These groups would share responsibilities in management of the centre.

The curriculum would be designed keeping in mind the needs of girl children and teachers would be trained accordingly. All these aspects are explained in detail ahead.

Name of the project : Phulwari

Phulwari means a garden of flowers. The girls have been equated with flowers here. A good gardener can make flowers bloom for happiness. Similarly proper grooming of girls in a family can make everyone's life better.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodology of implementation of the project is essentially people-oriented, with innovations in community involvement, training, assessment of child's progress and course content. These are described in brief ahead.

Community Involvement

Community involvement implies sharing of responsibilities with the local villagers in various aspects of project execution. This is not a static process and it evolves differently in different villages. However, some elements are common to most. These are

1. Location of the education centre

Usually a member of the community makes available covered space that belongs to him / her and is lying unused. When such a space is not available, people have contributed

bamboo and thatch for construction of a covered area that can accommodate upto 25 students.

2. Selection of Teacher

People suggest names of different persons belonging to the village that may be willing to teach. Finalisation of a teacher is done after a written test. There are no rigid educational qualifications. In general a female teacher is preferred. In practice, however, only 10% female teachers could be selected for this programme.

3. Sending girls to school

Here lies the major role of the community. Several parents have initial inhibitions in sending their girls. However fears are resolved through discussion in a group. Adult female group members are also encouraged to attend. However their number is very low (around 2 percent).

. 4. Centre Timing and Management

The timing of the education centre is decided by the community. The centre usually runs for a period of three hours on a working day. The timing in different centres could vary from early morning hours i.e. 7.00 to 10.00 a.m. to late afternoon hours i.e. 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. . The community also acts as a monitor to see whether the centre has opened on time (usually indicated by a bell) and whether the teacher is regular.

Teacher's Training

Getting a trained teacher at village level is out of question, it has been difficult to find educated persons too. Considerable time and effort was, therefore, spent in training of persons who were placed in the role of teachers by persuasion. Teacher's training is an ongoing process where the following aspects are given importance

A. Subject content : For the teachers to understand what is to be taught. Most often, as this was not known to the teachers, detailed written notes were provided. The prescribed books of the government used in regular schools were chosen, as they were familiar to the teachers and were readily available. However, only selected chapters were included in the course. A workplan was developed for the teachers during the training, distributing the course over a 8 month period.

B. Method of teaching : This is the most important aspect of the programme. Teachers were made to realise that the method of rote memorising is to be avoided and the process has to be made creative and joyful. Teaching of mathematics, science, etc is made enjoyable by using games and low cost teaching aids made by teachers themselves.

C. Behaviour, Hygiene, Environment : These are extra curricular aspects to which every teacher is made responsible. As children often have no background of schooling, even small things like whether the child has washed the face, wore the dress properly, combed the hair, cut the nails, etc. are considered important. Attention to speech and pronunciation aspects is also emphasized

Teachers training was conducted by Manavodaya every six months with the assistance of specialists in various fields drawn from various institutions including the government. The Training Programme is usually very intensive, as persons of low educational background are given responsible roles. Sometimes, the teacher available at village level is capable only for the first semester of the programme. We then have to constantly look for better educated persons for the second semester and train them accordingly.

Assessing Child's Progress

Initially a common written examination was held for all the centres. Later this was converted to monthly tests held at every centre by a supervisor who checks the progress made by every child in an informal atmosphere. Children who do not do well in the tests or the examination are made to sit in the front row and special attention is given to their development.

A test typically has both written and oral components. The written portion is kept objective as far as possible and has features like fill in the blanks, dictation, sentence making, etc. The oral tests have poems, book reading, general knowledge questions, etc.

Vocational Skill Development

At the end of the first year, the students were given vocational training in sewing and knitting. Both these were very popular and several girls made small garments which they are extremely proud of. Several sewing machines were arranged and special instructors were recruited locally to run the vocational course.

Educational Tour

Students were taken to the Regional Science Centre in Lucknow where simple experimental models have been demonstrated to explain the science behind common happenings everyday. They were also taken around the Zoological gardens. Most of them saw wild animals for the first time in their life.

Revolving Fund for Income Generation

As many girls came from very poor families who could not even afford a proper dress or nutritious food, a scheme of giving loans for income generation to parents of girls was introduced successfully. This loan is returned with 12% interest, so that the money can be revolved among several families.

3.0 COURSE CONTENT

The challenge before us was to evolve a course that suits the needs of the rural children, especially the girls. Modifications including substantial deletions were carried out in the existing primary school course and new features were added.

Approach to Course Development

The main approach to course development was to enable the children to acquire basic abilities in reading and writing together with elementary knowledge of Mathematics, Science and General Knowledge without burdening them with too much information. A separate subject on elementary Geography, History and Civics (Called Our World & Society) was added in the third semester for better awareness of the world around. Vocational training was also included at this stage.

The attempt has been to develop and retain the interest of the students in pursuing studies. The process of teaching was also made enjoyable by visits to the local post office, the zoo in Lucknow, conducting art and sports competition, etc.

Subjects

Language

Language teaching is started with Hindi alphabets. It is expected that students reach a proficiency where they can read and write other subjects with ease.

Mathematics

Addition, subtraction, multiplication & division and simple sums form the basic course. This is designed in accordance with the guidelines for minimum level of learning by the National Council for Educational Research and Training.

General Knowledge

This includes knowledge of important national and local leaders, dates, capitals, places, etc.

Science

Science taught in Phulwari is essentially practical environmental knowledge useful to children. Examples include Oral Rehydration Therapy, construction of soak pit, use of iodine in salt, immunisation details for new born, health and nutrition, etc.

Our World and Society

Elementary globe reading, neighboring countries, national flag, local administration, selected historical events, etc.

Vocational Training

For overall development of the girl child, a need was felt for imparting knowledge and skills in simple tailoring and knitting.

Simple Tailoring

This has several dimensions. For example, knowledge of various stitches, crude measurement and cutting of dresses like children frocks, pyjamas, etc. as well as the use of hand-operated sewing machine. Most girls are fascinated by this course which is also of practical benefit to them.

Knitting

We were surprised to note that most village women could not do simple wool knitting. Hence the girl child could not be taught knitting at home. Training in knitting was, therefore, found to be useful.

4.0 ACHIEVEMENTS

In this section we shall look into the achievements and drawbacks in the project from the results of a survey conducted among the students and their families. The survey was carried out during July to September 97 and covered 25 out of the 30 centres where the programme was started. 630 students and their families were contacted during the period. These included students who had discontinued studies from ongoing centres as well as those which had permanently closed for various reasons. The results of the survey can, therefore, be said to be fairly representative of the overall situation. These are presented in detail ahead.

Coverage

The coverage of the project during the first and second phase of operation was as follows.

Phase I (August 95 to July 96)

No. of centres opened	20
No. of students enrolled	400
No. of students dropped out	Nil

Phase II. (August 96 to July 97 and continuing)

No. of centres opened (total)	30
No. of students enrolled (total)	675
No. of students dropped out *	270

*An analysis of dropouts is presented ahead.

Composition of Students

The following chart gives the composition of different students in the project with respect to gender, age, caste and educational background.

A. Ratio of Girls to Boys 92 : 8
The boys were enrolled at a few centres only.

B. Age Group
8 to 12 yrs. 70%

12 to 20 yrs.	27%
Above 20	3%

C. Caste

Scheduled Caste	59%
Backward Caste	31%
Others	10%

D. Educational Background

No prior education	75%
Educated upto I class	15%
Educated upto II class	5% *
Educated upto III & IV class	5% *

* They felt a need to join Phulwari because of the poor quality of education in government schools.

Yearwise Retention

The real achievement in Phulwari was to bring the girls to the centres for education despite initial reluctance by both the parents and the girls.

First Year

During the first year of operation, a combined common test was held for all centres. about 60% girls cleared the test. However there was little or no dropouts and we were encouraged to start additional centres.

Second Year

During the second year, however, the number of dropouts suddenly increased. By the end of second year the project was able to retain only 60% of girls enrolled. The rest had dropped out for various reasons.

During this year, we discarded the system of combined test as it produced a lot of tension. Instead we followed a system of regular monthly evaluation by teachers. Students who did not do well in the monthly tests were paid special attention towards their weakness. Considerable effort was put in making the programme more enjoyable by having educational

tours, introduction of vocational education, etc. Attention was also given to overall personality improvement by discussing cleanliness, proper dressing, combing, manners, etc. This did have a good impact.

Behaviour Pattern of Girls after joining Phulwari

As a part of survey, the parents of the girls were asked to identify perceptible behavioural changes in their daughters as a results of their education in Phulwari. A variety of responses were obtained from this open ended question. These have been categorised as most common responses, frequently started responses and occasional responses.

A. Most Common Responses

Has started wearing her clothes properly

Is too more attentive towards cleanliness(e.g. takes bath more often)

Combs her hair regularly (roamed carefree before)

B. Frequently Stated Responses

Greets others with Namastey

Does not abuse, better speech.

Better obedience towards parents.

C. Occassional Responses

Handwriting has improved.

Has started speaking up.

More attention towards studies.

More attention to time.

No improvement observed.

Several (almost 25%) responses were unclear, i.e. They could not give any clear response regarding behaviour change.

Parental Attitude

The survey included a question regarding merits or demerits of girls' education in the opinion of the parents. The responses give a good indication of parental attitude on the subject.

At the outset, it must be mentioned that there were very few (only 5%) negative responses. We note here some interesting ones from both categories.

Negative Responses

"What will she do by much reading writing. Knowing a little bit is sufficient."

"Sufficient to identify words only, more education has no benefit."

"They may send their daughters to school, who have others to work at home. If I send my daughter then I would not get my meals."

"She is very bad mannered. What will education do ? Goat grazing is O.K. for her."

"I am at a disadvantage. If she studies then I have to work alone at home."

Positive Responses

"It is easier to get her married then. If she goes in for higher studies, she may even get a job."

"Education will at least bring manners in talking."

"Will lead to better qualities and knowledge. Would have better food at home."

"Would help in starting business."

"She can read and write letters and signboards."

"If she gets educated, she can educate her children."

"By education, she learns to be clean, becomes sensible. We are not asking her to take up a job."

"By educating our girl, she can read letters, medicine list. Now we can also keep our documents properly."

"Educated girls command respect in society. Only an educated girl can run her family properly."

"I would say that girls are no less than boys. If they get educated, they can do everything."

" It is very important to educate the girls. If she is educated she can go to the bank and withdraw money if necessary. The benefit of education can be observed at every step in life."

Analysis of Dropouts

A significant number of girls dropped out of the Phulwari programme for various reasons like joining regular government schools, marriage, parental pressure, domestic responsibilities, etc. Survey results show the following situation in this respect.

Total Dropout Percentage	40%
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Of the total dropouts

Those who joined government schools	38%
Those who discontinued studies altogether	60%
Those who joined other private schools	2%

There were several students who continued to study in Phulwari and also enrolled themselves in the government school for availing the benefit of wheat distributed there. They were considered as enrolled in Phulwari.

It may be noted that a significant proportion of dropouts occurred after the first class, when parents felt that their girl has studied enough. First class course content included basic addition, subtraction in Mathematics and simple sentence writing in Hindi starting from alphabets. The survey results give the following position

Of the total dropouts

Dropouts after simple literacy	38%
Dropouts after class I	45%
Dropouts after class II	17%

Problems Encountered

We do not see dropouts per se as a problem. Because one or two years of education in Phulwari did make a good impact on the life of the girls. Some of them joined government schools, some got married and moved away from the village. However, the dropouts would have been far less, if we had not faced the following problems.

A. Distribution of wheat in government schools

A new programme of distribution of wheat in government schools decreased girl attendance in some centres. Availability of 3kg. wheat per child per month is a strong attraction for poor families, unless they are sufficiently motivated to educate their daughters properly.

It must be mentioned here that while such an incentive has increased attendance in government schools, the quality of education imparted there has been seriously affected. Quite often there are 1 or 2 teachers handling 150 to 200 students. Several parents agreed that such education is of little benefit and, therefore, continued to send their girls to Phulwari.

In any case, it was a consolation that many girls joined government schools after initial education in phulwari as they were not going to any school earlier.

B. Absence of teachers for higher classes

In some centres, the attendance decreased as good teachers were not available for teaching in higher classes. We usually treat such centres as 'temporarily closed' while continuing to look for more teachers. Illiteracy or low literacy among adults is the principal cause of such a problem.

C. Local Management Problems

The local management of every centre is in the hands of villagers who are members of Self Help Groups in that village. This is helpful for close monitoring and involvement of parents in the entire programme. However, if there is a problem among the group members, this affects the running of the centre too.

Also a few centres were closed because of local vested interests who provoked the parents to demand new clothes for the girls and other facilities. The teachers could not handle the situation and, in fact, started siding with the vested interests

D. Attitude of Parents

Some parents held the view that one year of education for the girl (enough for her to start reading and writing) is enough. Accordingly we observed decreased interest to send the girl to school, after about one year of her education. In a number of cases, the parents forcibly stopped the child from attending school despite her interest in continuing studies.

5.0 PRESENT STATUS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

We had initially designed the programme for a three year period during which we were hoping that the girls would be able to develop a minimum level of learning (MLL) equivalent

to primary schooling (class V). At the end of two years, however, as the dropouts from the programme increased as described earlier, we had to take some important decisions.

- A. Not to extend the project beyond two years of education, except in a few centres where there is special interest both among girls and parents to go in for higher classes.
- B. Allow those centres which had temporarily closed due to absence of teachers or otherwise shall continue teaching after a suitable teacher has been found , to enable girls to benefit from the second year of education.
- C. To develop course content, organise teacher's training for those centres which were very keen to go in for higher classes.

Accordingly fifteen centres continued to run upto March 1998. In some of these centres, new teachers were recruited and trained to continue with the second year of education including vocational education like sewing. Sewing machines were sent to these centres and children made some interesting doll-size dresses like frocks, blouses, pyjamas, etc.

Among the above fifteen centres, there were four centres that went in for higher classes i.e. the third year of Phulwari. We did not want to discourage them as they were enthusiastic about education.

Third Year of Phulwari

The earlier programme of having a third year of Phulwari was dropped for most centres except those which showed special interest in going for higher classes.

As mentioned earlier, four centres were chosen for the purpose. A course content was designed to include the following subjects :

Agriculture, Language, Basic Maths, General Knowledge and Health.

Teachers were trained accordingly and classes at these centres shall continue till September 98.

Overall Lessons Learnt

There were some important lessons learnt from the project.

- A. Given a hostile environment, i.e. absence of interest in education etc. the project should have been designed for two years of education with a slower pace. For example, some centres performed very well and moved ahead into the programme with a good pace. Others were slow because of various local problems. The project should be designed to move slow with the worse circumstances in mind.

- B. The project did not foresee the problem of good teachers. We assumed that there would be some educated persons available in every village or nearby village to run the centres. This turned out to be untrue. For the lower classes i.e. upto class I, therefore, the project did not face any problem. But from second year onwards, the problem of good teachers became acute. Accordingly it would have been desirable to bring in outside teachers at higher remuneration for all centres.

Concluding Remarks

Phulwari achieved the objectives of promoting literacy & general knowledge of outside world, developing good behaviour, attention towards cleanliness, etc. among girls who were isolated from society earlier. A more ambitious plan of enabling the girls to complete primary grade schooling could not be achieved due to the various problems described.

In any case, the entire experience was very fulfilling, because even if the girls attended Phulwari for only one or two years, it had made a perceptible difference in their lives. There was also a definite attitudinal change among parents regarding education of the girl child.

Given the increasing role of women in local self-governance (33% seats for village heads are reserved for women), many of these girls are likely to take up important responsibilities in village governance. The project has certainly kindled a desire for education among the girls. As a result their families including their own sons and daughters would greatly benefit from this educational exercise.

