

Community Participation in Primary Education

Innovations in Rajasthan

Rajasthan has seen several innovative programmes in primary education and women's development. However, sustainability of innovation remains a perennial problem as several of these projects have been entangled in bureaucratic and political battles. Only a few like Shiksha Karmi manage to survive.

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I Ground Reality

Savitri's family is anything but well off. But when she dropped out of school here in Viraatnagar, it wasn't because of poverty. Her own classmates – and teacher – made it impossible for the 15-year old to continue. "The moment I enter the room in school, the other children make faces. They start singing 'bhangi aayee hai, aayee hai, bhangi aayee hai' ('the bhangi has come'.) The words of the song are foul and insulting." Savitri is from a family of manual scavengers. A group that's among the most vulnerable within dalits. The official label for them is 'bhangi'. Many here are from the mehter caste. And quite a few of these groups now call themselves balmikis. With even other scheduled castes practising untouchability towards them, they end up pretty close to the bottom of the social heap. Women scavengers cleaning dry latrines tend to draw their pallu over the noses and grip it in their teeth. That offers them some protection in their unsanitary work. The children at the school mimic this when Savitri enters. "They bite a side of their collar, push their noses up. Sometimes put a hanky on their faces. I would start crying, but it didn't matter to them [P Sainath 1999].

When we did the household survey we were amazed to note that the number of girls in the total was very low. We inquired further, went over the survey forms and met families that had 'missed out' the girls. They said they did not count them

as children, these young ones were married! 100 per cent of girls in Bapini village of Phalodi block of Jodhpur district did not attend school. This was revealed when school mapping was done (Lok Jumbish worker 1999).

These descriptions are not unique. They do not shock people in Rajasthan. These real life situations have been narrated over and over again in the last 50 years. Almost any discussion on educational access and educational backwardness of Rajasthan invariably begins (and often unfortunately ends) with stories of unequal access, persistence of caste prejudices and the situation of women and girls. These snapshots of the situation on the ground are often used to argue for more investment in the education of girls and also more foreign aid to Rajasthan.

Rajasthan has made considerable progress in the last 50 years especially in providing primary schools within one to three km radius. Yet, it remains one of the most difficult regions of India to ensure universal access to basic education. According to the 1991 Census, of the 7 million primary age children (6-11 years) in Rajasthan, the proportion attending primary schools is 52.8 per cent (3.7 m). Only 37.4 per cent of primary age girls attend school. The dropout rate in primary schools (between class I and V) is around 55 per cent and under 30 per cent of children complete education to age 14+ (Census 1991). Though there has been substantial progress post-independence in the num-

ber of educational institutions, enrolment and literacy rates – the overall picture remains bleak. At the beginning of the last decade (1991) around 6,200 villages and 20,000 small habitations did not have primary school facilities. Dalits, especially those belonging to communities like the balmiki, tribal communities like the garasia, people living in remote areas and in the margins of society have almost no access.

A significant numbers of the out-of-school children are girls. As seen in the Tables 1a and 1b, literacy rate among women from scheduled castes is 9.10 per cent and scheduled tribe is 7.10 per cent. Yet, formal primary schools are not within the reach of children from disadvantaged communities and remote areas.

Community Participation

'Community participation' is perhaps, the most misused and misunderstood word in development jargon today. 'Community' in itself means very little – it is like saying 'India' or 'Rajasthan'. Therefore, at the outset, it is important to define community participation in the specific context of primary education, that too in Rajasthan. Presumably, we are referring to those who are either left out or are participating from the margins.

Who are the people left out or are in the margins?

P Sainath's travels around Rajasthan reveal balmiki children are made to sit on their own mats, often outside the room or at the door. Participation in education is very low, worse among girls. Untouchability is still a reality, balmiki children have to deal with. The situation of girls is disturbing. As we have seen in the opening paragraphs of this paper, school mapping captures the invisibility of girls. Parents and their in-laws do not count them as children! Over two-thirds of children who are not in school are girls – their participation is critical.

Therefore in the Rajasthan context, community participation implies the participation of the disempowered; those who have not had access – as a community, as a geographic area or as a gender. Therefore this paper focuses on two important initiatives in Rajasthan, namely, Shiksha Karmi

Project (SKP) and Rajasthan Lok Jumbish. This paper also draws upon the experience of Women's Development Programme (WDP) of Rajasthan – which was a learning ground for many people involved in conceptualising, designing and implementing the above educational projects. And it also draws upon our experience for over 40 years. 'Community involvement' like village education committee and Mahila Swasthya Sangh constituted through a government order, consisting primarily of field-level functionaries and village leaders.

Therefore, community participation in the specific context of Rajasthan should ideally involve people who have little or no access to basic education. This is easier than done because it is these very people who are the most difficult to reach out. Being the poorest in our society, they are caught up in the daily battle for survival. From their perspective, a kind of education that does not lead to any tangible or intangible gain – could be dismissed as being irrelevant in their survival struggle. They do not readily participate in larger societal forums and bodies – whether it is the panchayat or the village education committee or the village women's health committee. Even if they are made mandatory members, they rarely speak out – even if they attend. Being at the bottom of social ladder, their interaction with the rest of

society is from a position of disempowerment. In a patriarchal society like Rajasthan, women shoulder the additional burden of gender-based discrimination. Women in poor communities face the added pressure of sexual abuse and oppression.

Apart from the 'target population' for community participation, given the social and economic status, gender inequality and also given that an overwhelming proportion of the poor are illiterate – mechanisms and processes that are used for community participation need to be appropriate. Systems that succeed in Kerala, Tamil Nadu or West Bengal are not likely to be effective in Rajasthan. Similarly, processes in Rajasthan are likely to be more human resource intensive than in areas that have a history of popular participation in social reform movements or struggles.

II Rajasthan Shiksha Karmi Project¹

Shiksha Karmi Project of Rajasthan was initiated in 1987 to improve access to basic education in remote areas where existing primary schools plagued with teacher absenteeism, non-functioning schools and community despair and cynicism. The accent was on inaccessibility due to remoteness and the terrain. This programme

has its roots in SWRC, Tilonia night schools. The concept of the Shiksha Karmi (SK) is based on a supposition that a change agent, especially in the field of education, can work effectively if he/she belongs to the same locality. The concept is particularly important for remote and backward villages where it is difficult for an outsider to stay or be accepted. This unique project started with acknowledging the problem of teacher absenteeism and dysfunctional schools. This in itself was a major step forward. The description that follows has been drawn from successive reports of the Shiksha Karmi Board between the period of June 1995 to June 1998.

The main elements of the project were:

- Identification of villages/hamlets where primary schools are non-existent or non-functioning, or where significant proportions of children are out of school.
- Energising the community for the need to have a functioning school.
- A SK school is established after two local residents, preferably one female, with educational qualification of class VIII and V respectively, are with the help of the community, identified and appointed as Shiksha Karmi after specific, intensive training.
- Training to Shiksha Karmi is regarded as a continuous process designed to upgrade qualifications, improving and promoting teaching abilities, reinforcing solidarity among them to act as social activists and providing motivation and support. Regular annual training and two-day monthly review and problem solving meetings follow intensive 41-day pre-service training.
- The project operates three different kinds of school – Shiksha Karmi day schools; Prehar Pathshalas (schools of convenient timings) to cater to children unable to attend day school; and Aangan Pathshalas (courtyard schools) which are non-formal schools, mainly for girls to prepare them for entry to regular day schools or Prehar pathshalas.
- The project has evolved a structure of training, support and monitoring by involving Shiksha Karmi Sahayogis (SKS) drawn from both the formal school system and NGOs. In addition, the project has created a category of Mahila Sahayogis (MS), part-time workers, mainly to escort girl students.
- To address the gender imbalance in the appointment of Shiksha Karmis, the project has set up Mahila Prashikshan Kendras (residential training schools) for Mahila Shiksha Karmis.
- The project involves a process of regular school mapping and continuous moni-

Table 1a: Rajasthan Literacy Status by Social/Economic Group, Gender (Rural)

By Land Size Group	Landless	Marginal	Small	Medium	Large
Male	44.70	52.60	61.70	63.70	65.90
Female	5.70	14.50	17.90	19.80	21.40
By Occupational Group	Agriculture	Salaried	Wage Earners	All others	Total
Male	57.20	83.30	44.90	70.40	60.40
Female	14.60	42.10	6.00	29.20	19.00
By Social Group	ST	SC	Other Hindus	Minority	Total
Male	39.10	51.80	66.40	45.90	60.40
Female	7.50	9.10	23.90	7.80	19.00

Table 1b: Enrolment Rate by Income, Social Group and Occupation (Rural)

By Per Capita Income	Up to 1500	1501-2500	2501-4000	4001-6000	6000+
Male	76.00	69.60	75.50	87.90	89.70
Female	31.80	32.10	40.10	55.90	65.40
By Land Size Group	Landless	Marginal	Small	Medium	Large
Male	63.10	73.80	76.60	83.60	80.00
Female	15.02	36.40	41.80	45.20	47.00
By Social Group	ST	SC	Other Hindus	Minority	Total
Male	57.10	58.40	76.80	71.90	68.50
Female	42.90	46.40	64.80	58.40	55.80

Source: NCAER/HDI Survey 1994.

toring through specialised institutions, NGOs and Village Education Committees (VECs). This permits regular feedback and mid-course correction. More than basic research and evaluation, the focus is on problem solving.

The project seeks to combine the openness and flexibility of NGOs with the legitimacy accruing to the official government system. A key element of the Shiksha Karmi process is its emphasis on consensual functioning, with all decisions related to schools (selection of Shiksha Karmis location of Prehar Pathshalas/Angan Pathshalas and mapping) are taken in VEC meetings. The pacing of the project is related to the contextual need. The project also seeks to adhere to a spirit of partnership – decision-making and control over critical issues such as selection of personnel, pace of expansion, forums and strategies for problem solving and generating approvals have not yet become bureaucratised. They also do not pass into the hands of government officials or experts. Slow reformism to ensure sustainability rather than radicalism marks the project's style.

– As a first step, dialogue is generated around and about the school, within the educational administration and the teachers. Then a decision taken to go to the concerned village and explore the possibility of opening a SKP school.

– Secondly, the SKP workers initiate dialogue within the village, with the panchayat, vocal leaders and/or concerned persons. A group from the village taken into confidence. At this stage there is no specified pattern on the composition of this group.

– Thirdly, the village identifies two people (age group 18-33) – eight standard pass for men and seventh standard pass for women. In early years SKP did not insist on women – because of very low literacy rate among women. The criterion of selection is important. The project looks for people with positive attitude, high energy levels and excitement about new chance to learn and be a teacher. There is also a clear focus on local youth, sense of belonging, identify with the community and willingness to work together. Where there is a choice, preference is given to candidates from the local community. This is done because the project has good back up, academic support and supervision. A Shiksha Sahayogi does this.

– Intensive training follows selection. Trainers drawn from schoolteachers, local unemployed graduates, NGOs, etc. The training also focuses on subjects, teaching

methods, keep in touch with the families of children, keep dialogue open, elicit support of families/leaders to ensure attendance, etc.

– There is one village education committee for every SK school. This has 11-15-members representing all castes, minority groups, educationally deprived groups and women. Impact on school environment and facilities. Encouraged by the positive response in Lok Jumbish, in 1994 SKP introduced school mapping and formation of village level forum to generate demand, educate the community, monitor and support the Shiksha Karmi.

– Given the projects aim to improve girls access to primary education, women are identified and trained in Mahila Prashikshan Kendra (MPK) – over and above the regular training programme. The MPK's function as a condensed education programme where girls with little or no education are brought up to grade VII or VIII level before they are sent for selection as Shiksha Karmis. There are 14 MPKs today.

– Another interesting aspect of the project is that NGOs are involved at the block level for training, educational support, monthly meetings, etc. As of now 28 NGOs involved in SKP – and in addition to their specific responsibilities, they participate/initiate mobilisation activities.

In SKP community participation started by official acceptance of the problem of dysfunctional schools and the need for an alternative means of creating and running a functional school. The community was involved in selection of SK; provide support in enrolling children (focus on girls evident), day-to-day support and monitoring.

SKP started as a 'people's problem'. Originally the driving force was the community. Today, it seems to have become a 'government's problem'. The present project leadership argues that government has enough baseline data to enable them to plan the opening of new schools and also identify the dysfunctional school. Therefore school mapping and micro planning is not necessary. It is indeed interesting to note that Phase III started in 1999 focuses more on the success of the 'alternative model'. The document does not say much about community participation in school mapping may be it is assumed. Now that the SKP concept has accepted by the educational system, government officials dealing with this project seem to be more preoccupied with the model of 'para-teachers' – not so much about local youth

who are drawn from the community and identify with the community. Project functionaries admit that there was greater reliance on community support during the early years. Now there is greater reliance on 'systems' – management, training, supervision, etc.

III Rajasthan Lok Jumbish

Rajasthan Lok Jumbish was launched in 1992 by GoI and GoR with support from Sida. The main objective of Lok Jumbish is to develop, demonstrate, catalyse and transform the mainstream education system with the objective of ensuring every child has access to basic education (grade I to VII). The starting point was a recognition that real problem is not one of supply alone, but unutilised capacities as indicated in low enrolment and participation rates. Even after 50 years of independence very few literate men and women are found among the poor in the villages. The problem of non-participation is chronic. Therefore, Lok Jumbish started with the mission to mobilise, motivate and energise.

Community mobilisation is the heart of Lok Jumbish, followed by acknowledging the importance of sensitive management

Table 2: Shiksha Karmi Project – Status as of March 1998

No	Unit	Achievement
1	District covered	32
2	Blocks covered	140
3	Block/unit	200
4	Day schools	2600
5	Prehar pathshalas	4335
6	Upper primary schools	20
7	Aangan pathshalas	105
8	Shiksha karmis	6085
	Male	5390
	Female	695
9	Mahila prashikshan kendras	13
10	Resource units	9
11	Village education committees	2137
12	Shiksha karmi sahayogi	188
13	Master trainers (after training)	798
	Male	757
	Female	41
14	VEC members	19917
	Male	13244
	Female	6673
15	Mahila sahayogis in	331
	(a) Day schools	53
	(b) Prehar pathshalas	178
	(c) DS+prehar pathshalas	100
16	Enrolment	2,02,000
	Boys	1,18,000
	Girls	84,000
17	Participation DS (per cent)	85
	Participation PP (per cent)	80
18	Retention DS (per cent)	65
	Retention PP (per cent)	55

Source: 17th Report, SK Board, June 1998.

and improving the quality of education. The document states that it is not enough to create delivery mechanism – access includes creation of demand. Parents and the community should acknowledge availability of facility and avail of it. Create an environment where parents feel motivated to send their children to school. Special needs of children have to be acknowledged and arrangements made for children engaged in work, girls who cannot attend formal schools, children of migrant families, nomads, tribal children and children with disability. Also those who have missed the bus!

It is quite interesting to note that at the very beginning there was recognition of the need to not only involve the community, but also the ‘teaching community’. Respecting the teacher and supporting her/him through training, motivation and encouragement was flagged as a very important area of focus. Project leaders acknowledged that this was not going to be easy. Therefore the motto was to learn by doing and move gradually by reviewing processes continuously. This hinged on the ability of the project to be vigilant and maintain open channels of communication and dialogue. There was also a commitment to transparency and accountability.

From the start there was some clarity on who constituted the community. The project workers were explicitly asked to involve those who have been left out of educational processes – and this was to be done through debate on the problem of education and the education of their children. There was also recognition that community participation cannot ‘happen’ unless the project can develop and refine techniques that can make this happen. As a result, in the first two years of Lok Jumbish a great deal of time and effort went into fine tuning techniques for school mapping. Similarly, the composition of the village education committee and the core group (‘Prerak Dal’) was also decided in the early years. Finally, Lok Jumbish developed village education register, retention register (grade by grade) and also the concept of a building maintenance and school environment forum called the ‘Bhavan Nirman Samiti’.

The above process went hand in hand with some tenets – which were followed in Lok Jumbish, namely;

– Engage the community – as represented by a group that comes forward or is created – in analysing the information generated, explore ways and means to make educa-

tion available to all children.

– Empower the disempowered to participate – create a ‘Mahila Samooh’ to help women gain information, knowledge and the confidence to participate in a larger forum.

– Make demands on the community – commitment to sending and maintaining children in schools; participate in improving school environment (building, trees, water, etc).

– Respond sensitively to the demands made by the community for more teachers, building, Sahaj Shiksha Kendra, etc.

– Make the functionaries, teachers and others accountable to the community.

This is the heart of community participation in Lok Jumbish. In the beginning there was no precedence and nor was there any guidance in terms of experiential knowledge. IIE, Paris had put out a document, but most of the literature available was on spatial-planning. These were essentially top down, a mapping exercise done by the state. Therefore Lok Jumbish decided to learn by doing – and this took almost three years. The pioneers started with emphasis on conducting diagnostic assessment, treating each village as the basic unit of analysis. Gradually they built on PRA techniques. The focus was on mapping all children in the school going age and the exact reasons for non-attendance. The challenge was to present this information in a form in which the people – literate and illiterate – can understand. How can anyone depict physical condition of the school, rooms, water, play area, etc and develop a visual database using symbols. The core principle was “rely on the people to diagnose the problem and articulate their demand”. There was a confidence that once, this happened, everything else will start falling into place.

After the first survey, the registers are to be updated every year. The VEC, Mahila Samooh are also expected to meet regularly. This has not always been smooth and problems have been reported. Data from all villages are first collated at the cluster, then at the block and finally at the state level. Then block data is collated and sent to the headquarters. This is an alternative database – because it is not always possible to match this with the one generated by the education department. Matching data generated from school mapping with database of the department is another area of concern – and given that Lok Jumbish is an autonomous body that was till recently seen as being outside the govern-

ment, legitimacy of this data in the eyes of the government was also a contentious issue. Notwithstanding these problems, the authenticity of this data in the eyes of the community was what mattered – and part of the effectiveness of the L J strategy is attributed to this legitimacy.

Once the data is collated and the village level plans are brought together, the block education management committee acts upon village level proposals. Till recently, it was empowered to sanction sahaj shiksha kendra schools, additional teachers, etc. The block steering group (BSG) is the principal level for planning and implementation. Again, there have been delays because sanctioning a primary school or appointment of additional teacher was not within the purview of Lok Jumbish. Building repair, construction of additional room also takes time. Establishing sahaj shiksha kendra was easier.

Decentralisation goes hand in hand with community participation. Recommendations, review and changes were, till recently, initiated from the cluster level upwards. The cluster level review planning meetings (RPM) is a forum where information is shared and the project functionaries take stock of the situation on the ground. This is fed to the block level RPM. The recommendations of the BSG are taken up at the state level RPM. Essentially this implies that the planning system flows from the cluster level and above. The database used at the cluster level is generated at the village level – the cycle set in motion by school mapping. This process developed over the years, fine-tuned and adjusted with experience. This system has not been smooth everywhere, but reports from the field were quite encouraging.

‘People’ are the most precious asset of Lok Jumbish and finding the people with the right aptitude and attitude was not easy. Finding women workers was even more difficult. Mahila Shikshan Kendra partly responded to this problem. Almost all the major policy decisions of the project drew their inspiration and also their strength from below.

Community Empowerment and Participation

Community participation and involvement threw up many challenges; it also opened many new avenues – which were not part of the original project design. These spin-offs really made Lok Jumbish

very different from other projects. Some of these intended and unintended spin-offs are:

– The problem of girls who have missed the bus was brought home. L J workers under pressure to respond to the educational needs of adolescent girls and young women by setting ‘Mahila Shikshan Vihar’. These residential condensed courses for adolescent girls and young women also became a means to identify and train women workers – a rare opportunity in Rajasthan. This is indeed a direct product of community demand and this would not have been possible without the involvement of parents.

– In 1995, the Sahaj Shiksha teachers realised that adolescent girls needed a lot more than the three ‘Rs’. Building their self-esteem and confidence, giving them information about their body, health and hygiene and just letting them discover the joys of childhood was important ‘Kishori Manch’ was thus born.

– ‘Balika Shikshan Shibirs’ (short-term adolescent girls’ education camp) that help girls who have missed the bus to catch up and join the formal schools, build self-esteem and self-confidence. This also would not have happened without the active support and involvement of parents. Winning the confidence of the community to send their girls to a camp speaks for itself. 1,495 girls participated in these camps till April 1997.

– School preparedness camp for children with disability was organised. Again, the problem of such children was brought home through school mapping. Kama blocks experience of working with children with moderate to mild disability.

– Reaching out and working with girls from ‘garasia’ tribe (Abu Road camp) another challenge. Educational processes have bypassed this community. Again, bringing girls from this community was possible because of continuous dialogue with parents.

– ‘Muktangan Pathshalas’ is yet another innovation – this ‘open’ school with flexible timings where the teacher is available for eight hours to tribal children who come at their own time – was also inspired by the needs of tribal children who wandered with their parents collecting minor forest produce.

– Surveying the building, creating a committee to oversee repair and maintenance – or even new construction; transferred the initiative to the people. When the community is ready, women trained to super-

vised construction and enthusiasm is high – delay generates cynicism. This aspect of LJ is a significant achievement. It also challenges conventional development projects to build infrastructure through people’s participation. Unfortunately there are too many vested interests – especially in the brick and mortar of development.

Lok Jumbish, December 1997

- Blocks covered: 58
- Revenue villages: 9,755
- Environment building done: 5,683
- Core teams formed: 4,420
- Mahila Samooch formed: 2,816
- School mapping completed 4,006: (percentage 70.49)
- New primary schools opened: 383
- New Shiksha Karmi schools opened: 454
- Upgrading to upper primary schools: 227
- Additional teacher: primary 752, upper primary 559
- Sahaj Shiksha Kendra: 3,703 (April 1997)
- As of December 1997 14,691 boys and 31,148 girls were studying in Sahaj Shiksha Kendra.
- Number of Balika Shibirs: 11, number of girls participating: 1,495.
- Number of new primary school buildings: 125
- Number of school building repaired and rooms constructed: 773
- Cost for repair much lower than current PWD estimates.
- Worked with minorities to make arrangements for education of girls.

Existing evidence – at least up to June 1999 – is encouraging. The results in the box above are quite evident. This does not mean that everything was fine and that there were no problems. Some issues have been flagged in the annual reports and others have been discussed widely in the project.

– It is said that all the poor were not involved – some village leaders and families on fringes were left out. Project documents highlight the need to make school mapping even more inclusive. Lok Jumbish has been working with the middle ground, and it would have worked harder to include ends of the spectrum.

– While almost every visitor and evaluator will agree that the village community and the children were energised (this is very important in an environment of despair), this cannot be said about the formal

school system. Evaluations point out that Look Jumbish’s impact on the teachers and administrators in the formal system has been, at best, patchy.

– Building consensus and initiating meaningful consultations is important. But in an unequal society as ours, unequal access, power and information base this kind of consensus building is not easy. It is not possible to involve everyone – the powerful, the disempowered, the teachers, administrators, etc. Lok Jumbish did make a conscious choice and in many areas (including the state capital) they alienated powerful people in powerful positions. High caste leaders and some powerful (again upper caste) administrators were not very happy with Lok Jumbish’s social agenda. It may be recalled that a similar fate befell Women’s Development Programme (WDP) of Rajasthan. Upper caste patriarchs did not welcome this project, which involved hundreds of very poor women, – as a result it was neglected and let to decay after foreign funds were withdrawn in 1992-93.

– Lok Jumbish was not able to create supportive environment that is very necessary for girls’ participation. The ‘empowerment’ agenda of Lok Jumbish was challenged time and again. Today, in the new phase for the project – this component of the project has been withdrawn.

– Generate information that is accepted by all, and is legitimate in the eyes of all is also a contentious issue. Data generated by Lok Jumbish was not accepted by all. This led to friction and tension.

IV Implications for State Policy

One of the questions that is asked in Rajasthan today is ‘can a poor, backward state’ afford such cumbersome and time, energy, resource-intensive processes? Fifty years of experience has shown that there are no short cuts. We have been so much in a hurry that we have not had the time to plan and move systematically. Initial investment in process-oriented approach may be high, but returns have been encouraging. Shiksha Karmi and Lok Jumbish workers argue that there is really no other way to ensure the deprived have access – leave alone the ones who are in the margins like balmiki, garasia.

Community participation is not a one-time affair. Sustaining meaningful participation demands vigilance. We also need to organise activities and develop mecha-

nisms for continuous involvement, year after year. This needs a very high level commitment and there is no space for cynicism or despair. The administration has to play a proactive role in sustaining the momentum. Where there is complacency, processes are reversed quickly.

Seven years of experience in Lok Jumbish has shown that community participation is human resource-intensive. It needs people with commitment and vision. It needs a supportive environment. In the present scenario some NGOs can surely help sustain the momentum and we have to recognise that not all NGOs have the aptitude or inclination for such processes. If people are the most precious resource, demoralisation through administrative red tape, suspicion and disrespect can kill.

Another question that is asked is whether we need to involve the community in building construction, repair and maintenance? Despite millions of dollars spend on building PHCs and sub-centres under various family welfare projects; the quality of building is for all to see. Poor quality buildings, corruption, lack of ownership – these are familiar pictures in the development book. Unfortunately, bricks and mortar of development have become ends in themselves. Vested interests of administration linked to the ‘contractor raj’ have opposed any transparency in this field. They have opposed community participation tooth and nail. But the village community has a stake in good buildings. They are the only ones who suffer.

Yet another contentious issue that has drawn wide attention in Rajasthan is the need for women’s development component in Lok Jumbish and Mahila Prashikshan Kendras and similar inputs in Shiksha Karmi Project. Government officers ask – Why Mahila Samooh? Universalisation of elementary education will be impossible unless girls are encouraged to participate. Women need space to discuss, gain confidence to articulate their needs and aspirations in a larger forum. They cannot participate effectively in the VEC or even the panchayat – unless they gain the confidence to speak and have access to information beyond their immediate present. Experience of WDP has shown that individual leaders get isolated and are not as effective. Therefore any project or programme that seeks to involve women has to work towards building and sustaining a group. WDP has also shown that rural women have the ability to critically assess their own strengths, plan and take initia-

tive. The question really is not whether we need women’s group in Lok Jumbish – the question is why do senior and responsible people in Rajasthan government do not want women’s groups.²

Sustainability has remained a big issue in Rajasthan. Programmes and projects have a tendency to be identified with the founders. Given the overall administrative and political environment in the state – societal commitment for basic education, women’s development, empowerment of dalits and other backward/disadvantaged classes and communities cannot be taken for granted. Top level political or across the board administrative commitment is not visible for the above issues. As a result, individual administrators with personal zeal/commitment introduce programmes with an agenda of equality and empowerment. Often these projects are seen as something on the sidelines. The rest of the mainline is at best dismissive. In a feudal social, political and administrative climate, commitment to individuals is given precedence over commitment to an idea or a goal. As a result, such out-of-the-way projects tend to get caught in conflicts.

Failures and Challenges

Women’s Development Project failed to inspire confidence in Rajasthan, even though it was hailed as a major breakthrough across the country and even in the world. The then prime minister late Rajiv Gandhi hailed WDP as a landmark in India. This project inspired similar initiatives in other states. Yes, the bureaucracy and political leaders in Rajasthan were not impressed. The very fact that a high caste was challenged in a rape case was cause enough for the upper caste leaders of Rajasthan to refuse to support the project. And this feeling ran across party lines.

Shiksha Karmi Project has thankfully, survived the 13-year jinx – so far. The challenge today is whether the community participation dimension of the project will survive in an environment where the very rationale of involvement of the community for promoting primary education is being questioned. Evidence suggests that in Phase III systems are given more attention than participation. Participation could become mechanical, where formulas and forms take precedence over content and process but it is too early to say which way the wind will blow.

The same cannot be said for Lok Jumbish – it has got caught in the seven-year jinx.

There are many danger signals from above. Despite positive evidence there is still little appreciation among political leaders and mainstream administrators of the importance of community participation and empowerment in primary education in Rajasthan. These are seen as NGO processes that do not have a legitimate space in the mainstream. Community participation is the heart of democracy and decentralisation – commentators argue that nothing short of a social reform movement will shake up Rajasthan society from its feudal mind set. And this remains the most formidable challenge.

Rajasthan has the distinction of being the home of a range of highly visible innovations in primary education and women’s development – the Women’s Development Programme of 1984, Shiksha Karmi Project of 1987 and Lok Jumbish Project of 1992. As mentioned above all these innovative projects have been entangled in bureaucratic and political battles. Shiksha Karmi has managed to survive. The other two have been reduced to a pale shadow of their former image. Sustainability of innovation has remained a problem in the state.

It is in this context that a study of community participation and empowerment in primary education has to be viewed. On the one hand the ground situation in Rajasthan is crying out for more decentralised and people centred approaches to education, women’s development and sustainable livelihood. On the other hand, there is little evidence – at least among majority of the political and administrative elite – of commitment towards such people centred processes. Most recently, a senior official of the government who is in charge of Lok Jumbish, Shiksha Karmi and DPEP asked, “What has gender got to do with primary education? Why should an education project waste time on Mahila Samooh, training of women and things like that? This deflects attention from the main business of education...similarly we have a lot of data – districtwise and even schoolwise. We can plan with the data we have. Is school mapping necessary to justify opening primary schools and/or Shiksha Karmi schools? A lot of energy, time and money are wasted on these processes.”

Having emerged from a predominantly feudal system in 1950, democratic process and democratic culture are yet to take root. Caste, community and other forces continue to exert a lot of influence in Rajasthan

society. Unlike the ongoing debate in Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, the debate on community participation and empowerment in primary education and the relationship between women's status and the education of girls has unfortunately been caught up on the rhetoric of personalities and political parties. There is little public debate on these issues in newspapers, in government circles and among the lay public. Travelling around the districts of Rajasthan one cannot but notice that it is only the very poor who resort to the government schools in rural and even in urban areas. Anyone with even a little bit of money prefers to send their children to private schools. Within poor families, there is also a gender dimension – girls, if they are sent, go to government schools. Therefore, the political and the administrative elite of Rajasthan have no stake in improving the quality and outreach of basic education.

People across the country are today asking about the sustainability of innovations, especially when the bureaucracy does not wholeheartedly endorse such innovations. Rajasthan seems to be more susceptible than other regions of the country. Is it because the administrative culture of the state is still feudal and rooted in individual charisma and loyalty? Is it because democratic processes have not taken root? Or is it because no social reform movement has churned up the society enough to make people question age-old values and customs? The answer probably lies in a combination of above factors – but the fact remains that India has a lot to learn from Rajasthan. But is Rajasthan willing to learn from the rest of India? [27]

Notes

- 1 This section of this paper draws upon Vimala Ramachandran and Harsh Sethi 'Rajasthan Shiksha Karmi – An Overall Appraisal', Desk study commissioned by Sida, Embassy of Sweden, New Delhi, February 2000.
- 2 The government of Rajasthan, director, Lok Jumbish made the following declaration on January 17, 2000 in the High Court of Judicature of Rajasthan; S B Civil Writ Petition No 113/2000; Vijay Laxmi Joshi versus Lok Jumbish and Others: "The petitioner was working in the unit of Women's Development. The same has been abolished and the reason being that because of financial constraint every effort was made to see that the project should be reduced to such an extent that there may not be an excessive burden on the project and also to see at the same time that the very object of the project may be achieved which was related to universalisation of primary education, providing

access to primary education for all children up to 14 years and accordingly a decision was taken to abolish the unit of women's development in the project and the same has been done so for the Phase III of the project The First Phase of Project ended on June 30, 1995. The Second Phase June 30, 1998 up to December 31, 1999. However for the purpose of transferring the balance fund available with Sida the latter agreed to pass this fund up to December 1999. The Parishad under such financial constraints was required to restructure itself and exhaustive exercise was carried out in this regard and the following decisions were taken which are as under:

- (1) The Unit of Sahaj Shiksha should be merged into education for children of deprived section.
- (2) The school mapping unit should be merged into planning, monitoring and evaluation, and
- (3) The unit of women's development to be abolished.

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