SNDT Women's University, Mumbai

From the SelectedWorks of Professor Vibhuti Patel

Winter February 15, 2012

Grassroots

Professor Vibhuti Patel

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/professor_vibhutipatel/42/
Bagfuls of nutrition from a women-run unit

There is very little that distinguishes the hamlet of Madri from the innumerable others that dot southern Rajasthan. This is a region where the Aravallis make their presence felt in gnarled hillocks, where water is scarce and where the land yields its harvests grudgingly. People here, including toddlers, know the edge of hunger. But making a difference is a factory in Banswara, run by the Shitala Mata Women’s Self Help Group. It ensures that the nutritious food it produces reaches 7000 children and 3000 pregnant women and lactating mothers every month through a network of 172 government-run anganwadis.

PAMELA PHILIPPOSE, Banswara (Rajasthan)

When Ranjani Ashok, 54, runs the anganwadi (nursery) in this village – perched on the border that separates Dungarpur and Banswara Districts – she serves her charges their small helping of khichdi (gruel of rice and lentil), it disappears in a trice. The children in Ranjani’s anganwadi are not picky eaters. Unlike well-fed children from prosperous city neighbourhoods, these children eat pretty much whatever is served to them, unless they happen to have a fever.

“In most homes children are given a roti or two, with barely any dal or vegetable to go with it,” observes the spry anganwadi worker. Of late, Ranjani has also started giving the anganwadi children a nutritious food supplement as take-home rations. “It’s actually a mix of soya bean flour, channa dal flour, wheat and a little sugar, and the kids seem to like it,” she smiles.

This nutritious supplement has its own story to tell. It comes to Ranjani’s anganwadi from a factory in Banswara, run by a local women self help group (SHG). In fact, it reaches 7000 children and around 3000 pregnant and lactating mothers every month through a network of 172 government-run anganwadis. The Banswara unit, which was set up in September 2011, now produces one metric ton of this supplement every day. The model is a useful one since it combines two potentially transformational interventions – a regular nutritional supplement for children age between six and 36 months and pregnant and lactating mothers, as well as the generation of sustainable employment for rural women coming from poor households.

The supplement, which goes under the label of RajNutriMix, has been developed by the World Food Programme (WFP) in partnership with the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), and in consultation with the Government of Rajasthan. It complies with the Supreme Court’s guidelines on the promotion of decentralised production of supplementary food for supply under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) as well as the Apex Court’s stipulations on the daily intake for vulnerable women and children. Under the project, a take-home ration of 990 grams of RajNutriMix per week for pregnant women and lactating mothers as well as severely and acutely malnourished children and 822 grams per week for all other children below the age of three years, is provided.

The raw materials for the supplement are procured locally and the production process is completely mechanised. They are first cleaned or the making of agarbattis (incense sticks), pickles and papads. This seems to have been achieved in the Banswara unit. Today, the 12 ‘factory managers/workers’, all members of the local Shitala Mata Women’s Self Help Group, supervise and run the operations of the unit. These are ordinary rural Rajasthani women with just a few years of schooling. Most are aged anywhere between 30 and 40 years, although there is an 18-year-old and a 60-year-old on the team. They have undergone three rounds of training, and were involved in the process from its inception. In fact, they even observed the machinery of the plant being installed. They are capable of procuring the best raw materials locally, keeping accounts, managing machines, maintaining registers and attendance rolls, as well as making wage calculations and doing the banking. Wages, incidentally, are deposited directly into banks to avoid any possibility of funds being siphoned away.

Members of the Shitala Mata Women’s Self Help Group weighing and filling bags of RajNutrimix, a fortified blended food in their factory in Banswara. This is what Ranjani Ashok has been giving her children lately.

(Continued on page 4)
M

SUSAN PHILIP, Chennai

“M

He lends you a helping hand to help yourself

Today, Udavum Karangal is a multi-tasker in community service. It is a home for the unwanted and the orphaned. It is a shelter for the mentally challenged. It is a source of solace for the destitute and the dying. It is a haven for society’s rejects, the HIV-infected and the spastics. It is also a stepping stone to mainstream life for those who want to use it as such. And the person behind it: ‘Papa’ Vidyaakar

Vidyaakar with teachers Shalini and Neelam and a staff member, against the backdrop of a painting on a bus used in the School on Wheels outreach programme.

Before the 1990s, the term ‘mentally challenged’ had yet to be coined. It was simply known as ‘mentally retarded’. All the Udavum Karangal family was nurtured as his own. Vidyaakar was trained in ophthalmic nurse while her husband holds an MBA degree. She has a way of animal therapy is being worked out. Many of these problems are created by society, and it is up to society to provide the answer too.” Screening programmes are regularly held and children with learning disabilities and problems such as muscular dystrophy are identified. Their families are advised how to care for them. A community health centre has been opened, where anyone can receive treatment. The focus is also on equipping the underprivileged to cope with life. Training centres offer courses in nursing, tailoring and computers, helping young men and women to arm themselves with qualifications that will get them a reasonably good start in life.

Vidyaakar, who established Udavum Karangal, says he is inspired by Mother Teresa. His heart drives him in his work, as does passion and even new techniques. At Shantivanam, animals provide therapeutic and functional relief.

The School on Wheels marks a significant milestone on the path of motivating society to take care of its own. It was started as an outreach programme for the children of migrant labourers from states like Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. Two teachers, Shalini and Neelam, both recovered psychiatric patients, are the teachers, and immensely proud of their work. They go to three sites, and teach 30 children in each for three hours every day, six days a week. The programme begins by giving the children, aged below 7, a good oil bath. Once they’re clean, they’re taught the three Rs for an hour. They’re also given a glass of milk, and then the teachers talk to the parents about their concerns. The original idea was that the children would have their classes in the bus. But the construction company was so enthused about the scheme that they now provide space on their site for the classes, pay the teachers a salary, and also provide snacks for the children. It has become their project, not ours,” says Vidyaakar.

“Hundreds of children have studied and come up in these 30 years”, he says. “A couple of them are now in charge of our centres. Many are working in good organisations, and support us. Some are in moderate jobs, others work as shop assistants or maids. I don’t measure their success in terms of their occupation, but in terms of being self-reliant, and being able to support others.”
How a mid-day meal can light up young lives

It's a meal that matters. In Jodhpur, thanks to the Mid Day Meal Scheme, children in Classes 1 to 5 get 12 grams of protein and 450 calories and those in Classes 6 to 8 get 20 grams of protein and 700 calories every day. It's a scheme that runs even during summer holidays and in times of drought. The meal is not only an incentive for children to come to school, it is also the only wholesome meal they get on any given day. More than 3.5 lakh students have benefited from the scheme. They have learnt to eat with a spoon and respect food. And as the children sit and eat together, there are no caste barriers.

A s the clock chimes 11 am, Neetu Yadav, 10, and her classmates' eyes turn expectantly from the blackboard to the school gates. As the roar of the autorickshaw carrying their mid-day meal grows louder, the 35 students at the government-run Rajkya Prathmik Vidyalaya, Ghanchiyon ki Gufa, Saraswati Nagar, erupt into a loud cheer. Jodhpur, located in the vast Thar Desert of western Rajasthan, is the state's second largest city, with a population of around 3.68 million (2011 Census). The city prides itself on its educational institutions and the average literacy here is 81.56 per cent - with female literacy registering 73.93 per cent. Impressive figures, given that average literacy rate in the state is 67 per cent.

That's the reason an initiative like the Mid Day Meal Scheme assumes so much importance here. No one can put it better than little Neetu. “The meal is certainly an incentive for me to come to school,” she says with a beaming smile. A Class V student, Neetu particularly loves the khichadi (dal and rice cooked together with spices) on today's menu. Her parents, who were once farmers in Bihar, migrated to the city in search of work. Her father pays a monthly sum to the centralised kitchen. Other schools in Jodhpur, located within a 26-kilometre radius, which are provided food directly from a centralised kitchen.

Children sharing the mid-day meal. For innumerable children in the desert city of Jodhpur, the meal is the only wholesome one they get on any given day.

The meal grows in popularity as the clock strikes 1 pm, and in the adjoining Rajkya Prathmik Vidyalaya, Madhuban Housing Board, children sit in rows on the cemented platform at the school's entrance, as teacher Mooli Tolani is helped by some older students in carrying the food containers and serving the meal to the 84 students present. At 11 am, this is a sight replicated across the 467 schools in Jodhpur located within a 26-kilometre radius, which are provided food directly from a centralised kitchen. Other schools have their own kitchen, utensils and cook, depending on the number of enrolments. According to official records, a total of 33566 students in the 4052 government schools in Jodhpur District have benefited from the Mid Day Meal Scheme since September 2011.

In the adjoining Rajkya Prathmik Vidyalaya, Madhuban Housing Board, children sit in rows on the cemented platform at the school's entrance, as teacher Mooli Tolani is helped by some older students in carrying the food containers and serving the meal to the 84 students present. At 11 am, this is a sight replicated across the 467 schools in Jodhpur located within a 26-kilometre radius, which are provided food directly from a centralised kitchen. Other schools have their own kitchen, utensils and cook, depending on the number of enrolments. According to official records, a total of 33566 students in the 4052 government schools in Jodhpur District have benefited from the Mid Day Meal Scheme since September 2011.

The meal provided under the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education – commonly known as the Mid Day Meal Scheme – is customised to local taste. When the scheme was launched on August 15, 1995, students were given ghughri (boiled wheat porridge with jaggery). Since 2002, cooked meals are being provided comprising a set menu of local favourites – dal-bati, dal-roti, roti-sabji, sweet or savoury rice and khichadi, on a weekly rotational basis. Approximately Rs 15 per child per day is spent by the government.

The Mid Day Meal Scheme has been a major source of nutrition for many who were getting very little to eat. Mahajan says, “If there was no mid-day meal, children in Classes 1 to 5 would not be getting 12 grams of protein and 450 calories and those in Classes 6 to 8 would have been deprived of 20 grams of protein and 700 calories. That's the reason we have been running the Mid Day Meal Scheme here, even during the summer holidays and in times of drought.”

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)
Where are the poor, missing children?

SHOMA A. CHATTERJI, Kolkata

Where are the missing children who never return? What happens to their distraught, desperate and anguished parents? What is the responsibility of the police in such situations? All this and more comes through in a documentary film called “110002” made by young activist-journalist Vivek Asri. “110002” is the story of Kunwarpal, father of a 11-year-old who has been missing since November 2010. For one year, Kunwarpal is been driven from pillar to post only to be left disappointed and empty handed each day of their lives; they live in the hope that their loved one would return some day. “110002 presents the melancholy of those who have lost their children. It is a story of helplessness and uncertainty. It is a tale of parents, who have no faith in their present and little hope about future,” says Vivek.

Why a number for a title? Explains Vivek, “110002 is the pin code in Old Delhi, the area where the office of central missing person’s squad is located. This is the office where every parent of a missing child runs to, where their hope lie are shattered by the insensitive system. The title comes from the address of this office: Missing Person’s Squad, New Police Station, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002.”

The location is peopled by the lower middle-class, whom do not have the means to reach the media, where NGOs and social workers complain about the sudden disappearance of a child from the family can spell eternal tragedy for the family involved. In the film, a grieving mother tells the viewer how she keeps going to the dargah and mausjid (mosque) to pray while practical fathers admit they will perhaps never find their missing children because they are poor, marginalized and completely ignored by the police.

Vivek found no funding source for his film. So he made it using his savings. Arpna, his wife, researched for nearly six months, met the parents, visited orphanages and red light areas in and around Delhi. Since it was a low budget self-financed documentary, Vivek planned to finish the shoot quickly. The film was shot in December 2011 and January 2012 mainly in Delhi, Meerut, Hapur and Bulandshahar. It won the 2nd Best Documentary Film Award at the recently held Sitiguri International Short and Documentary Film Festival.

In the film, a distraught father sticks poster of his missing son.

The film focuses on the anguish of the parents and their disillusionment with the law and order system. The visuals are flush with emotions. “I am poor and that is why the police are not lifting a finger to help me. Had I been rich, the same police would have come out of my house,” says Kunwarpal, who says he has gone to every nook and corner of the city to look for his missing child.

Says another father: “If a child is dead, there is certainty in the ending. But if a child goes missing, the parents are never certain about how he is, where he is, how he is doing and whether he will come back to his parents some day.” A father runs to the street tea shop where a worker says he has seen the boy in the picture working in a hotel. Another hunt begins. None of the parents ever tire of searching and waiting for their lost ones even when all hope seems lost. “The police and the Government of Rajasthan have planned. These will come up at other sites in Banswara, as also in the adjoining districts of Dungarpur, Pali and Udaipur, all of which have been identified as food-insecure ones. There are challenges of course, and training women to run the units will take effort. But once each unit takes off, its benefits are manifold.

Meanwhile, in Ranjani’s anganwadi, representative and country director, WFP India, “Food insecurity impacts not just the body but the brain and general neuro-physical growth. We also know that if children don’t get the right nutrients before they are two, they will never be able to catch up. This is why we see the Banswara initiative as an important one.”

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)
Across a borderland: Chronicles of trafficking

This excerpt from a recent book trains the light on the tragic phenomenon of trafficking across the Bengal-Bangladesh border.

Women from Bangladesh are largely trafficked to India. From India they might then be taken to Pakistan or the Middle East. In a research by Santha, in two red light areas of West Bengal it was revealed that most of these women migrate from one place to another. Ninety per cent of the red light areas that they have identified as places that they have worked in are situated in the states that border Bangladesh. Most of these are either in the Northeast or in West Bengal.

In one particular red light area named Changrabandha about 66 per cent women said that they have come from Bangladesh. In Dinbazar many of the sex workers have said that their mothers came from Bangladesh, and women are trafficked through this border like any other commodity.

Most of the women in sex work were illiterates. Many of these women entered prostitution when they were younger than 18 years of age. Most of these women came from families of either wage earners and cultivators or their mothers were sex workers as well. The mothers who are themselves sex workers find no alternative except letting their daughters take up the same profession because as children of sex workers they are stigmatised and discriminated against. They are deprived of education or even a social environment with any promise or hope.

The socio-economic profiles of sex workers of at least Dinbazar and Changrabandha portray that these women and children did not have too many options to take up other professions. Even while in the profession their lives are never secure. Basically there are three to four modes of operation. They can work independently, or on contract basis or even under a ‘madam’. Women in the third category had to give up all their earnings to the madam, and they were given room, food and some other necessities in lieu of their payments. Even on contract basis they give half of their payments to madams. The best of them earn about Rs 5000 per month. This takes care of their necessities and their children.

Some of them even send money home. Their insecurity is portrayed by the fact that they are trafficked often from one centre to another. These women are at the mercy of both criminals and the police. Being near the border often they are forced to give shelter to criminals from either Bangladesh or India. Also, the police use them for sex without any payment. They often cater to trucker’s crossing zero point and to attract them payment. They often cater to truckers’ crossing zero point and to attract them.

There are cases where women who are brought from Bangladesh to the metropolitan towns in India face tremendous brutality. One such case is that of Hamida, a young Bangladeshi girl, who was brought to India at the age of 10. She ‘suffered a series of brutal rapes at the hands of the male who brought her to New Delhi, along with some of his friends who were Delhi policemen…. Only one of the accused men has served jail time’.

That this is a region of extreme insecurity for men and women crossing the border has been dramatically portrayed by the case of one Jayanti Bala Das of Bangladesh. In January of 2005 five Bangladesh nationals, of whom two were minor children, crossed the Indo-Bangladesh border and entered India. The Border Security Force (BSF) arrested them from a Baro Bridge across the Ichamati River. The area in which the incident took place is under the jurisdiction of the Basirhat Police Station in the North 24 Parganas.

The Bangladeshis nationals including one Jayanti Bala Das were all taken to the Soladana BSF camp at around 5 pm on the same night (10 January 2003) one BSF personnel allegedly raped Jayanti Bala. Thereafter, these ‘infiltrators’ were put in a small boat with holes and efforts were made to push them back. Allegedly, when the boatman refused to go he was threatened at the point of a gun. The boat capsized in the middle of the river and only Jayanti Bala and her one-year-old son could save themselves.

On 13 January the villagers of Bagundi, who had given her shelter, handed her over to the police of Basirhat. She was charged under Section 14 of the Foreigners Act. On 21 January a dead body was found in the Brickkiln Canal in South Basirhat. The man was identified as Jayanti’s husband Basudey. When a case was lodged against five BSF personnel, the BSF men were unwilling to hand over their personnel to the Basirhat police. Although the Bengal-Bangladesh Border BSF disagreed that Jayanti was raped, the officer-in-charge of this case stated that initial examinations proved that she was molested.

On 27 January, the sub-divisional judicial magistrate of Basirhat issued warrant against five BSF men. In July, Jayanti was handed over to the Sromojibi Mahila Samity for safe custody and on 15 September 2003 a writ petition was filed on her behalf. The cases are still pending. Jayanti’s case reflects the situation of women who are trying to cross the border. Their status of being a foreign-born woman increases their vulnerability. No one is willing to shoulder any responsibility for these women. The state that they leave is glad to get rid of them and the state that they enter finds them unwanted.

(Excerpted from Women in Indian Borderlands, edited by Paula Banerjee, associate professor, University of Calcutta, and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, research associate, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata; Published by Sage Publications; Pgs: 268; Price: Rs 395; Courtesy: Women’s Feature Service)

VIDURA

Read the journal from the Press Institute of India that covers issues pertinent to the media.

Yearly subscription only Rs 200.
Foreigners in your own land?

India is multi-ethnic. You should not label a part of it as northeast or southwest, well-known writer U. R. Ananthamurthy had said at a festival of the Naga Students Union of Bangalore a couple of years ago. But many of us in India unwittingly refer to people belonging to Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagal and Tripura as Chinese or people from the north-east. Despite the fact that people from these states, particularly the youth, study and work in India’s metros, the states figure in the news only during assembly or parliamentary elections or when there are disturbances of one kind or another

PUSHPA ACHANTA, Bengaluru

magazine focussing on the latest issues in Mizoram. NSUB organises an evening social for Nagas in Bangalore every two years, in October. Started four decades ago, the body has around 6000 members, most of who come to Bangalore to study. “The body assists youth hailing from Nagaland, Assam or Manipur in finding job or education options,” says Trichuo Thomas, A Naga youth who worked in the city for three years, he is associated with NSUB.

Rumour, spread via mobile phone text messages and word-of-mouth, resulted in the departure in August last year of hordes of people from the northeast from many cities in India. Anti-social elements took advantage of the situation and threatened them, verbally and physically. There were some Tibetan youth in Karnataka, either working or studying in college, who bore the brunt. After things settled down, those belonging to the economically disadvantaged sections found it difficult to return, and thus lost jobs and income. “I was able to get another job with the help of my network of friends who are also from a nearby village in Assam. But my previous employer was unwilling to pay for the month I had been away. Some of my acquaintances who left found it hard to secure employment; those who remained experienced a constant feeling of insecurity,” explains Narayan Singh (name changed). A 29-year-old of Nepali origin, with a son age three and a wife, a domestic worker, he had been working as a security guard in a residential complex in one of the middle-class areas of Bangalore for more than four years.

A number of NGOs, educational and social research institutions and individuals who campaign for human rights, came together to form the Peace and Solidarity Forum in Bangalore in mid August 2012. They set up a mobile phone helpline that was available round-the-clock; it helped hundreds of people, especially from low-income families to get their salary. The volunteers worked with the police to provide assistance to those who returned regarding employment, salary arrears, accommodation, recovering advances, etc. Volunteers Manohar Elavarthi and Tejaswini S. say the helpline received about 3000 calls for support.

Islamic groups based in Bangalore took the initiative to host a meeting that saw people from different faiths and communities from the north-east states participating. Says youngster Tenzin D. from Tibet who was there at the meeting: “As we are from another country, we have refugee status here. We are given an identification document which must be renewed annually. Many of us come to India at a very young age to live and study in Dharmsala. We have not visited our families for over a decade but we miss them. Communication is difficult due to technological and linguistic challenges as people remaining in Tibet do not have telephone connections and speak dialects which we have too little touch with.”

Zamee Thotithong, a 21-year old undergraduate student in Bangalore from the Kuki Tribe of Manipur says, “As I have been here for seven years, I know Kannada and Hindi. At the time of the exodus in 2012, I was not scared nor did I try to leave, because of the protection offered by the police. Of course, my parents back home were anxious about my well being.”

In fact, our identity and traditions are based on the tribe we hail from,” says Hranghtang Chhungi, a Mizo who works with the Tribal Affairs Division of the National Council of Churches in India. For instance, there are Khasi and Garo tribes from Meghalaya, Meitei and Kuki from Manipur and Bodos from Assam. Only some tribes allow members to practise religion, according to Ladbasuk Lyngdoh, a theologian from Meghalaya. Due to the minimal avenues for employment and higher education, many people from the northeast relocate to towns and cities elsewhere. However, owing to differences in language, food, clothing and practices, they find it difficult to get on with the locals, while keeping in touch with their roots. Established in 1984, BMA has a registered membership of 3000. The organisation gathers a few hundred Mizos in the city every 2nd October during Vangpui Kut, the autumn festival when they enjoy traditional food, indoor games and cultural activities together. BMA also hosts a yearly football tournament for its active league that has more than ten teams, and publishes an annual magazine focussing on the latest issues in Mizoram. NSUB organises an evening social for Nagas in Bangalore every two years, in October. Started four decades ago, the body has around 6000 members, most of who come to Bangalore to study. “The body assists youth hailing from Nagaland, Assam or Manipur in finding job or education options,” says Trichuo Thomas, A Naga youth who worked in the city for three years, he is associated with NSUB.

Rumour, spread via mobile phone text messages and word-of-mouth, resulted in the departure in August last year of hordes of people from the northeast from many cities in India. Anti-social elements took advantage of the situation and threatened them, verbally and physically. There were some Tibetan youth in Karnataka, either working or studying in college, who bore the brunt. After things settled down, those belonging to the economically disadvantaged sections found it difficult to return, and thus lost jobs and income. “I was able to get another job with the help of my network of friends who are also from a nearby village in Assam. But my previous employer was unwilling to pay for the month I had been away. Some of my acquaintances who left found it hard to secure employment; those who remained experienced a constant feeling of insecurity,” explains Narayan Singh (name changed). A 29-year-old of Nepali origin, with a son age three and a wife, a domestic worker, he had been working as a security guard in a residential complex in one of the middle-class areas of Bangalore for more than four years.

A number of NGOs, educational and social research institutions and individuals who campaign for human rights, came together to form the Peace and Solidarity Forum in Bangalore in mid August 2012. They set up a mobile phone helpline that was available round-the-clock; it helped hundreds of people, especially from low-income families to get their salary. The volunteers worked with the police to provide assistance to those who returned regarding employment, salary arrears, accommodation, recovering advances, etc. Volunteers Manohar Elavarthi and Tejaswini S. say the helpline received about 3000 calls for support.

Islamic groups based in Bangalore took the initiative to host a meeting that saw people from different faiths and communities from the north-east states participating. Says youngster Tenzin D. from Tibet who was there at the meeting: “As we are from another country, we have refugee status here. We are given an identification document which must be renewed annually. Many of us come to India at a very young age to live and study in Dharmsala. We have not visited our families for over a decade but we miss them. Communication is difficult due to technological and linguistic challenges as people remaining in Tibet do not have telephone connections and speak dialects which we have too little touch with.”

Zamee Thotithong, a 21-year old undergraduate student in Bangalore from the Kuki Tribe of Manipur says, “As I have been here for seven years, I know Kannada and Hindi. At the time of the exodus in 2012, I was not scared nor did I try to leave, because of the protection offered by the police. Of course, my parents back home were anxious about my well being.”

In fact, our identity and traditions are based on the tribe we hail from,” says Hranghtang Chhungi, a Mizo who works with the Tribal Affairs Division of the National Council of Churches in India. For instance, there are Khasi and Garo tribes from Meghalaya, Meitei and Kuki from Manipur and Bodos from Assam. Only some tribes allow members to practise religion, according to Ladbasuk Lyngdoh, a theologian from Meghalaya. Due to the minimal avenues for employment and higher education, many people from the northeast relocate to towns and cities elsewhere. However, owing to differences in language, food, clothing and practices, they find it challenging to blend into the local milieu.

Organisations such as the Naga Students Union of Bragalore (NSUB) and the Bangalore Mizo Association (BMA) play an important role in helping Nagas and Mizos to integrate with the locals, while keeping in touch with their roots. Established in 1984, BMA has a registered membership of 3000. The organisation gathers a few hundred Mizos in the city every 2nd October during Vangpui Kut, the autumn festival when they enjoy traditional food, indoor games and cultural activities together. BMA also hosts a yearly football tournament for its active league that has more than ten teams, and publishes an annual

'Flying like butterflies, touching the sky'

When Meera Devi’s husband died she did not know where to go with her two small children. She was an orphan and her husband’s family had treated her badly. Now that he was dead her entire world seemed to crumble. However, some kindly neighbours in Sultanpur Chilkana of Dehradun Districts, helping several villages of Saharanpur and Dehradun Districts, helping several women in need.

Ramrati is Dalit woman who overcame adverse conditions in her family to play a very active role in an anti-liquor agitation in Pather Village. Despite grave economic hardships in her family, her commitment to the movement did not diminish.

Shahnazza suffered poverty and ill-treatment but she could rise above her problems to get trained as a midwife and take up several responsibilities with Disha. She contributed to reducing the distress of several other women.

Says Naseema, “Before taking up social struggles, we had been waging struggles within our families. Our sufferings as women have built in us a firm resolve to protect other women. This is what gives us the extra strength to go all out in struggles, to put in all we have.” Adds Naseema, “When oppressed women get a chance to get out of their narrow confines, they want to turn the earth around, they want to fly like butterflies and touch the sky.”

Muslim women activists faced a lot of opposition from the religious orthodoxy. The extent can be gauged from what Naseema says: “The hell you talk about can’t be worse that my living hell in the present. So let me use this opportunity to escape.” When Shahnazza was first selected for health-camp training, she could neither read alphabets nor write them. But Disha did not reject her for this reason. She was encouraged to learn the basics and she improved later.

Bharat Dogra, Delhi
Providing one meal a day... delivering a life-line

The Bharatpur slum in Odisha’s capital is a picture of despair: Mud houses with plastic sheets for roofs, refuse scattered around and the stench of human excreta everywhere. But what catches the eye more than the general squalor are ragged, hungry-looking children wandering around listlessly. It is against this backdrop that the Swatantra Jatiya Shishu Sramik Vidyalaya and its principal Sukanti Mohanto stand out like a beacon of hope.

SHARMISTHA CHAUDHIURY, Bhubaneswar

Every morning, Sukanti Mohanto, the school principal, arrives at the Swatantra Jatiya Shishu Sramik Vidyalaya (Special National Child Labour School), is out of her home by 9.30 am. For half an hour before her school begins, she spends their entire day doing various odd jobs. The boys would go and collect wood from the nearby elephant sanctuary, and the girls would remain caught in a never-ending cycle of domestic work. Some of the children were even sucked into working in the local zari (embroidery) unit for a pitance. Both boys and girls here would also rummage through the garbage heaps in search of bottles and plastic to sell, or aluminium wires to burn in order to extract the metal. None of them knew what regular meals were about. Always ravenous, they would eat anything they could lay their hands on, even if it was from a garbage heap. If nothing turned up, they would go hungry.

However, the small, menial jobs they did would fetch them some money. A portion of their earnings would be handed over to the parents, but a little something was always kept back and that was how many got inexorably drawn into guthu (chewable tobacco)-addiction and gambling. Substance abuse runs high among the children here, playing havoc with their already malnourished bodies.

The Swatantra Jatiya Shishu Sramik Vidyalaya, a part of the District Child Labour Project (Khurda District) of the Odisha Government and run by Vishwa Jeevan Seva Sangha, an NGO, has always emphasised the nutritional aspect of its intervention. The mid-day meal served here is far more nutritious than anything the children get at home. Every child is allotted 100 grams of rice and 20 grams of dal (pulses) per day. On Mondays and Saturdays, they are served rice and vegetables cooked in dal - the vegetables consisting of potatoes, brinjal and seasonal green vegetables. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the emphasis is on protein with the children being given a curry of soyabean and potatoes with rice. Every child gets 100 grams of soyabean and 20 grams of potatoes. On Wednesdays and Fridays, they used to serve egg curry (one egg each) with rice. But after the authorities of a nearby temple objected to a non-vegetarian item being cooked and served, it was decided that the children be given the eggs to take home with them, while at school they are served vegetables, dal and rice.

The question to ask is what would these children have been eating if they did not have access to this meal? Says Puja Maharana, 11, “When there is no school, I usually have no lunch, although my mother leaves some rice from the previous night for me and my brother. After my parents return home from work, I have dinner with my family.” But even this one family meal is sometimes in jeopardy. As a teacher put it, sometimes Puja’s father comes in drunk and life suddenly turns very fraught, with her mother inevitably getting beaten, which also means that nothing gets cooked in the house and nobody eats.

Another student, Puja Maharana, declares that the food at school is much tastier than what she has at home. She loves vegetables, but at home the only vegetable she eats is potatoes. It is not as if the small income the children make is essential to keep the family from starving. However, what generally happens is that this money keeps getting frittered away. “A lot of the money goes into alcohol and gambling – and that means the household budget for food shrinks,” observes Mohanty.

The impact of alcoholism and drug abuse on the nutrition levels of the children in the family has never been seriously studied nor has the issue made it into any policy framework or interventions on the ground. Added to this is the social dimension of over-worked working mothers not being able to spare appropriate time for child feeding, caring and rearing practices. This would also require a policy intervention if the nutritional status of India’s children is to be improved. But there can be no denying that in the Bharatpur slum, poor nutrition levels among children are very closely linked to broader life patterns, dependencies and addictions.

Mohanty, despite her best efforts, sometimes feels despondent. But she hopes for the best. “We can give the children one meal a day, but through it we try to deliver a life-line,” she says.

(Courtesy: Women’s Feature Service)

Shift to e-journal

Dear Reader,

With increasing printing costs, the Press Institute of India, a non-profit trust, has been compelled to stop publication of the printed edition of Grassroots. Grassroots is now published only as an e-journal. The announcement to go e-journal (which can be accessed by clicking the Grassroots section on the home page) will be Rs 100 and payment (in the form of DD favouring Press Institute of India) can be sent to the Director, PIL-RIND, RIND Press, Taramani CPT Campus, Chennai 600 113. Existing subscribers will receive either a PDF version or a password to log into the e-version.

We look forward to your support always.

Director

This is the Swatantra Jatiya Shishu Sramik Vidyalaya (Special National Child Labour School) that delivers non-formal education, and good food, to working children and dropouts in the 9-14 age group, in the Bharatpur slug in Odisha’s capital, Bhubaneswar.

The mid-day meal at the Swatantra Jatiya Shishu Sramik Vidyalaya is cooked in a little yard outside the schoolroom.
Child rights defenders in a conflict zone

Every morning when Sunila Hazda sets off to work, she is not sure what time she will return home. Her work as a defender of child rights, or Bal Bandhu, requires her to traverse through dense forests and steep hills. She has also to be on guard against snakes and other animals as she walks from village to village in the remote Naxal-affected Harkar Panchayat in Khaira Block of Bihar’s Jamui District. Although she has been born and brought up in the Santhal-dominated panchayat, the lack of roads and electricity makes her wary and unsure at times. However, there is one thing that Sunila is sure about — she will stop at nothing to see that every child in the panchayat goes to school

SWAPNA MAJUMDAR, Jamui (Bihar)

Having gone through a long and difficult struggle to study, Sunila Hazda, 19, the daughter of a woodcutter, doesn’t want others to face the obstacles she had to negotiate. Her parents sold firewood to garner resources for her education and allowed her to stay in a hostel 110 km away from home to pursue her education. After getting the nod by the prime minister’s office, the Bal Bandhu programme aims to protect children’s rights in areas of civil unrest with the help of Bal Bandhus chosen from within the community. Two resource persons for each district have also been selected. By making 23 of the 48 anganwadis functional, the programme has helped immensely is that of the 226 schools in the block were non-functional. By making 23 of the 48 non-functional schools operational again, they have managed to motivate 798 children, who were already enrolled in school but irregular, to attend classes regularly.

But it’s not been an easy ride. To achieve this, they have had to handle delicate situations as well. For instance, in August 2011, when Bal Bandhu Savitri Kumari went to the Parati Primary School in Arnuwabank Panchayat of Khaira Block to participate in the flag hoisting ceremony on Independence Day, she found that the villagers were very agitated. They told her that the neighbouring school had been warned by the Naxals not to unfurl the flag. Seeing the uncertainty and fear among the community, teachers and students, Savitri sought the help of her mentor RP Srinivas Chakki.

After Srinivas reached the school, the duo called the villagers down. On the instruction of the Parati School, Srinivas had received a specific warning and finding it had not, they left it to the community to decide what should be done. Considering that their children were looking forward to the event, the villagers decided to go ahead. In fact, a village elder was nominated by the community to do the honours in the absence of the principal.

Like Savitri Kumari, Nazrhwana Naz, too, has understood what it means to be a Bal Bandhu. In March 2011, the lives of 553 students in Garhi Panchayat had come to a standstill when their middle school was targeted by extremists. A big part of the school was destroyed by a bomb they planted to prevent the government from housing a battalion of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) on the premises. The CRPF had moved out in January, two months before the incident, and were expected to return in time for the panchayat elections to be held in the state that month.

According to Nikhat Parveen, the school’s headmistress, the blast created panic and fear within the community, particularly among students and their parents. “I had to go from door to door to convince them to return. But it took a long time to gain their confidence,” she recalls. It was Nazrhwana Naz, who helped Parveen persuade the community to send their daughters back to school. Incidentally, Naz is Parveen’s daughter. At 19, Naz has been critical in raising awareness about the importance of education in the Garhi panchayat area. Having grown up in a district where girls are married young, Naz has concentrated on reaching out to the mothers. Simultaneously, she made efforts to none. Now, not only does Bachchi Devi sit on the chair, she has become actively engaged in upholding child rights. After participating in several awareness meetings on child rights, she organised and led rallies against child labour on International Day against Child Labour. Whether it is Naz or Neetu, the young Bal Bandhus face many challenges. Not only do they have to be motivated and inspired at heart, they also have to stand up against bureaucratic delays and corruption. The lack of buildings for schools, no provision of residential schools/hostels, particularly for girls, and the difficult terrain have only added to the hardships. But despite this, these young Bal Bandhus carry on, true friends of children living in areas of conflict.

(Courtesy: Women’s Feature Service)
Rekha Talmaki has made a serious and commendable effort at conducting survey-based research on the socio-economic status of tribal women in Valod (South Gujarat) where committed workers have dedicated more than five decades of their lives in village development activities based on Gandhian principles. Her field visits have played a crucial role in bringing new insights and a gender lens. She has examined tribal women’s predicaments in the context of the status of women in India, where the main factors in determining socio-economic status are income, education and occupation. Talmaki has provided an exhaustive essay, focusing on the occupational life and health profile of tribal women and their status in the family in decision-making. She takes on to evaluate the situation to find out to what extent the Gandhian ideology of Antyodaya is implemented for tribal women, who are the poorest of the poor in the economic ladder and at the bottom of the pyramid.

The author has rightly used a conceptual framework that includes socio-economic parameters of inequality, poverty and social exclusion. She has provided a definition for ‘tribe’ and highlighted indicators such as working status and demographic aspects of tribes in Gujarat as well as the size and distribution of Scheduled Tribes. She reveals that the sex ratio, birth rate and tribal women in Gujarat is relatively higher compared to other parts of India. Does it indicate better status on the socio-economic, cultural, educational and political platforms? The social geography of Surat shows volatile changes due to industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation. In what way have these factors affected the lives and survival strategies of tribal women? The author has made an honest attempt to answer such difficult questions.

With the help of a questionnaire administered to 498 women in the 18-59-year age group, in 11 select villages in Valod, Talmaki has tried to analyse various developmental efforts. She says a large number of Halpatis or Dublas is found prominently in Surat District. They are very poor because they do not get permanent employment. They are good in taking care of animals; local milk cooperatives encourage them in animal husbandry. It emerges from the study that the tribal communities, particularly women, have been excluded from the mainstream economic development for the past many decades. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to many other aspects that can lead to the overall development of tribal women.

The study brings to the fore the efforts of veteran Gandhians such as Babubhai Shah, Savitaben Chaudhari and Dashriben Choudhari. Popularly known as Dasharibha, the eminent Gandhian and freedom-fighter who was born in 1918 in a tribal family has been the role model for all tribal women in the region. She now resides in Vedchhi. She took part in the freedom struggle and taught Kasturba Gandhi reading and writing — a good example of how tribal men and women actively participated in the freedom struggle. After Independence, Dasharibha devoted her entire life to educating people.

In the book, Talmaki says that women in Valod perform various income-generating activities. They are either engaged in agricultural activities or in producing papad or in dairy production. Very few women among those surveyed were engaged in anganwadis (nurseries); only four women had government jobs. Women associated with agricultural activity were also engaged in papad or milk production. For example, Halpati women are basically agricultural labourers but they do well in dairy production. The women do not possess land but those who are members of self-help groups, manage livestock and have their own bank accounts. These are empowered women. Their economic status has improved thanks to entities such as Lijjat Papad Unit and milk cooperatives. More than 50 per cent women know the market value of their products.

A Gandhian ideology definitely played a very important role. So, too, did self-help groups who are emerging on a large scale in rural Valod. Development from the grassroots, a dream of Gandhiji, is now becoming a reality.

It noteworthy that the author’s recommendations emphasise the need for investment in tribal women’s education, vocational training, meaningful participation of tribal women in local self-government bodies, anti-alcohol efforts and prevention of domestic violence among tribal families through collective efforts and social intervention.

The study brings to the fore the efforts of veteran Gandhians such as Babubhai Shah, Savitaben Chaudhari and Dashriben Choudhari. Popularly known as Dasharibha, the eminent Gandhian and freedom-fighter who was born in 1918 in a tribal family has been the role model for all tribal women in the region. She now resides in Vedchhi. She took part in the freedom struggle and taught Kasturba Gandhi reading and writing — a good example of how tribal men and women actively participated in the freedom struggle. After Independence, Dasharibha devoted her entire life to educating people.

In the book, Talmaki says that women in Valod perform various income-generating activities. They are either engaged in agricultural activities or in producing papad or in dairy production. Very few women among those surveyed were engaged in anganwadis (nurseries); only four women had government jobs. Women associated with agricultural activity were also engaged in papad or milk production. For example, Halpati women are basically agricultural labourers but they do well in dairy production. The women do not possess land but those who are members of self-help groups, manage livestock and have their own bank accounts. These are empowered women. Their economic status has improved thanks to entities such as Lijjat Papad Unit and milk cooperatives. More than 50 per cent women know the market value of their products.

A Gandhian ideology definitely played a very important role. So, too, did self-help groups who are emerging on a large scale in rural Valod. Development from the grassroots, a dream of Gandhiji, is now becoming a reality.

It noteworthy that the author’s recommendations emphasise the need for investment in tribal women’s education, vocational training, meaningful participation of tribal women in local self-government bodies, anti-alcohol efforts and prevention of domestic violence among tribal families through collective efforts and social intervention.

(Shibhuti Patel, who has reviewed the book, heads the Department of Economics, SNDT Women’s University, Mumbai.)

It is encouraging to note in the book that respondents from Vedchhi want to do something for their community and village. Respondents from Ranveri want their daughters to be educated, so that they would teach their children. It shows that women have understood the importance of education. In the sample, there were very few widows, but nearly 50 per cent women said that there should be some special schemes only for widows.

Education of tribes started with the Vedchhi Movement and it later flourished, thanks to Jugalram Dave, who founded of Swaraj Ashram – Vedchhi in 1930. The Udyogwadi Unit started in 1954 and various programmes were undertaken by Babubhai Shah. A separate women’s section was started in the Udyogwadi Unit. Women started getting guidance in income generating activities and vocational training. The Lijjat Papad Unit, for instance, provides occupation based on self-sufficiency and contributes to empowering women in Valod.

Self-help groups, milk cooperatives, the increasing participating of women in political activity, agricultural activities, empowerment of deforestation and alcoholism by self-help groups, the educational status of women and their children, accessibility to infrastructural activity, improved decision-making capacity, and the knowledge and use of contraceptives show positive changes in the socio-economic status of tribal women in Valod. The improvement has not taken place overnight. A Gandhian ideology definitely played a very important role. So, too, did self-help groups who are emerging on a large scale in rural Valod. Development from the grassroots, a dream of Gandhiji, is now becoming a reality.

It noteworthy that the author’s recommendations emphasise the need for investment in tribal women’s education, vocational training, meaningful participation of tribal women in local self-government bodies, anti-alcohol efforts and prevention of domestic violence among tribal families through collective efforts and social intervention.

(Shibhuti Patel, who has reviewed the book, heads the Department of Economics, SNDT Women’s University, Mumbai.)
YOUR INTERESTS MAY BE VARIED

BUT YOUR SOURCE OF INFORMATION REMAINS THE SAME.

Whether it's business, sports, politics, regional, national or international news, The Hindu Group of Publications covers it all. Its range of publications caters to all tastes and makes sure you stay well informed, no matter what the topic may be.

THE HINDU GROUP OF PUBLICATIONS