

Tilonia's Alternative Schooling

- S.Srinivasan and S. Anandalakshmy

A grass roots perspective

The Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) was established in 1972, in Rajasthan, in the small village of Tilonia, as a registered, non-profit, voluntary organization. Tilonia is one of 110 villages of Silora Block in Ajmer District.

The terrain in and around Tilonia is arid and rocky: large expanses of dusty land, peppered with rounded rocks and thorny trees. Only camels could thrive here; the people merely survive. One realizes this, when one overtakes camel-driven carts on the road or passes camels, reaching out for what edible greenery they can find on the lanky shrubs. There are no perennial rivers here, no abundant monsoon, water is a perpetual scarcity.

This was the spot chosen by a small group of young, idealistic University graduates fired by an inner call to work for the poor, to set up shop and work with the people. From its inception, therefore, there was a continuing dialogue with the rural communities. In the early years, the SWRC team also worked out the principles, which would govern their approach and activities. These came to be called, the "non-negotiables", and they included a commitment to gender and caste equality, to honesty and integrity and to environmental protection.

An idea is born

The process was not one of social workers implementing a programme for the poor, but one of their planning with the community and putting the plans into operation. The core team of the SWRC was constituted of people from different parts of the country, with varied educational qualifications and talents, and developed a cohesiveness and a symbiotic functioning over time. As the scale of SWRC's initiatives grew, it moved in the direction of becoming a "barefoot college", a system that was open for the common man and woman and child. The organization was able to identify two major objectives and give them concrete shape.

- The first objective was to create a conducive environment for participatory decision making, involving both the community and the SWRC team of workers.
- The second objective was to decentralise the focus of SWRC's initiatives to Field Centres, situated away from Tilonia, in villages in different directions.

These two processes of participatory decision making and decentralisation made clear the link between development and education. Thus the need to provide education, with a focus on issues related to development, was perceived as an imperative. The dialogue consisted of a review of the critical aspects of the education of children, as they relate to development. There were several questions that confronted them, the main questions among them listed below.

- How can Primary education be made more relevant to them and accountable to the community?
- Will the educational system prepare them to work in their villages?
- What is the learning process that will prepare them for responsible citizenship?
- What will prepare the children to work for development in their own settings?
- How can children demand attention to their aspirations?
- Can their large numbers enable them to develop a collective voice?
- How can the community be involved in planning for itself?
- What are the strategies for sharing of knowledge between the educated and those who have not had the opportunities to get an education?

The Barefoot College Approach

The formal schools were found to run at timings convenient for the teachers. Most of the teachers were from nearby towns and cities; none lived in the villages where they worked. The curriculum followed in the school was alien to the everyday reality of the children and this resulted in a mutual indifference between the community and the school system.

The Barefoot College was planned as an alternative, that could fill the lacunae. Its major thrust was to value and reinforce the skills and abilities of the people in the village: the artisan, the craftsman, the story teller, the puppeteer, the manual worker, the herder of sheep and goats and the woman who could cook, sew and conserve resources. A secondary thrust was to demystify academic expertise and to translate the formal knowledge received in higher education, into viable and feasible strategies for the rural communities.

The project was aimed at supporting the community to identify its own needs and to make plans to address them. The children had to realise, that the schooling they had missed, could be recovered at their very doorsteps. Literacy and numeracy would help them to be active participants in the processes of development and to take control over their own lives.

When all the alternatives to make schooling relevant to village life were discussed at length, the following aspects emerged:

- Parents must be involved in planning.
- The school timings must be convenient for the children.
- Teachers who live in the village must be selected.
- Curricula and methods of teaching must relate to their environment.

The children in the villages in and around Tilonia herded goats or helped their parents in the tasks of subsistence farming. Also, there were the never-ending household chores for the girls, which effectively kept them occupied the whole day. The families lived on the fringes of sustenance and could be termed marginal, in both economic and social aspects. They were invariably on the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. This profile would surely qualify them to be considered “unteachable” in the regular formal schools!

The Tilonia Night School Project

The Tilonia Night School project began in a small way, with three schools in the year 1975. This number grew to nine in 1980 and to twenty-nine in 1981. In the beginning, only boys attended these schools. Gradually, one or two girls joined in. Today, twenty years later, more than 60% of the students in the Night Schools are girls.

According to the decisions taken by the communities and the Barefoot College, the teachers have to be residents of the village. There are two teachers, on an average, for every school. The strength of the school varies, but it could be as high as fifty. The schools are located in far flung villages, but are easily identified if one drives in at night, by the solar lamp that lights up the school. The school works for two to three hours every evening, not enough to cover the standard curriculum, but the motivation of the children is so high, that they do cover a lot of ground. The curriculum is developed with the specific communities in mind and contains both what is both familiar and what is relevant. The selection and the continuous training of the teachers are in-built for the system to work. Young men (and women) with at least a few years of High School education and an aptitude for teaching are trained on the job. The monthly meetings constitute an important part of the training and serve as a forum for the sharing of ideas and experiences and an educational process. After attending these, the teachers feel a renewed energy and enthusiasm for their jobs. They are also glad to have greater clarity on both objective and method. If the methodology had been established, what were the new thought processes? In what way can the Barefoot College claim to have broken new ground?

When development issues began to be discussed at the teachers' meetings, the importance of the Night School as a nucleus for awareness-building, began to emerge. In fact, it came to be

seen as one of the primary functions of the Night Schools. In the process of examining the aim of education, its potential leverage in the development of the village got recognized. The teachers of the Night Schools were also the same people involved in planning and implementing development programmes.

At the start, the curriculum had been planned, drawing on the environment of the child. The focus was further broadened, to relate the curriculum to the concerns of development. After many hours of deliberation, the Barefoot College agreed that the conventional school, which imparted literacy and numeracy, up to the level of Standard V, did not satisfy the requirements of the community. The rural people considered education as a vehicle of social mobility and as a method for increasing the market value for employment. Formal schooling, as they could observe, did not satisfy either of the objectives they had defined. Further it served only to alienate the children from their surroundings. They rejected the system.

The Barefoot College, by its very definition, did not see Education as an isolated input in the lives of children, but as a process that must be strongly founded in their own concerns. Ultimately, the best input for the children is that which enables them to break the stranglehold of poverty. Knowledge, which had come to be traditionally defined, as that which is taught in school, had to be redefined in our context. Literacy is definitely necessary and useful, to deal with the matters of the world outside. Literacy and numeracy are generally recognized as tools that increase access to development. However, literacy it was found, was not sufficient in itself, to help the children to get employment and to deal with various aspects of the power structure. The realization of this fact caused a paradigm shift.

The Children's Parliament

It was decided that if the children were to understand the linkages among the education system, the schemes for development and the political process, they needed to begin with hands-on experience in self-government. Thus the concept of a Children's Parliament was born. To begin with, the constituencies were defined. Two or three adjoining Night Schools would be one constituency. The electorate was made up of all children attending the Night School for a period of two years or more. The criteria for eligibility were determined, by the children themselves. The children wanted Bunker Roy, the Director of the Barefoot College, to act as the President and be in over all charge of their elections.

They also decided that children in the age group, 11 to 12 years, would be eligible for filing nomination papers, as candidates. Polling, by secret ballot, and in the presence of impartial observers, would be held in each of the Night Schools, where polling booths would be set up. Polling would be held simultaneously in all the booths, and the ballot boxes sealed and transferred overnight, to Tilonia or to one of the Field Centres. The counting of votes would take place the next day and the results announced to the children gathered there. The elected members would then select, from among themselves, the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the Speaker of the House. The President (the Director of the Barefoot College) would administer the oath of office to all the members of the Parliament on the same day. When the term of two years comes to an end, the President would announce the holding of fresh elections. This process, of electing independent, non-party members, to the Children's Parliament, every two years, has provided the children an opportunity for first hand experience with democracy.

The Children's Parliament takes seriously, the role of monitoring the Night Schools. The elected members occasionally make comments about the administration of the College. The members of the Children's Parliament work in coordination with the Village Education Committees. The nucleus of the idea of self-government, through duly elected representatives appears to have generated a veritable movement. The children are not playing with models of democratic functioning: they consider democracy to be real and viable for them. They also put pressure on the SWRC and their local government for solar power, water pumps and other improvements in the village. They teach the parents and older relatives about the functioning of democracy and demonstrate its effectiveness.

The “paradigm shift”, referred to earlier, was the change of focus in the purpose of education. Normally, the school system has a curriculum, which is expected to prepare the children for the future. That literacy is a means of making books, newspapers and magazines comprehensible to the children was obvious. Providing them the tools of communication to deal with a literate officialdom was also incontrovertible. Self government was seen adding value to education. In the Night Schools, literacy shared the space, with practice in democratic functioning. This, in turn, made the children more effective in dealing with the present, as well as in being equipped for the future.

Children of the Night Schools are involved in almost all the developmental activities of the SWRC: Hand pump/water management, solar energy, dairy, crafts, puppetry and theatre.

The Key Role of the Teacher

There were two criteria for the selection of the teacher:

- a) He had to be from the village community and be accepted and respected by the people and
- b) He had to have adequate literacy and numeracy skills, and be confident to impart them to children.

The exact level of education was not fixed, but the aptitude and motivation for teaching were considered important.

Once selected, the teachers would come to Tilonia for training, for a period of one month. The first half of the month is spent on informal, wide-ranging discussions ranging from methods of teaching to socio-political problems in the village. The time would also be utilised for workshops in which learning situations would be simulated. These sessions also formed the basis for development of teaching aids. At the end of the fortnight, the teachers would return to their villages to conduct a survey of the children in the age group, 6 to 14 years. With the collection of demographic and socio-economic information about all the families in the village community, the teachers would return to Tilonia to synthesize the data and to make a tentative plan of action. At this time, they would also be oriented to methods of evaluation of academic progress and the maintenance of school records.

The teacher is constantly supported and reinforced in the attempt to involve the community in the Night School. In the regular school system, the public is not welcomed into the schools. The curriculum is treated as a matter for specialists, who have been trained in colleges of Education. It is just the reverse in the Barefoot College. The local bard, the wandering story-teller, the midwife, the Health Worker --- any one of them could be a resource person for the Night School. This brings the local community into the school; but what is more important, it enables the children to respect their own cultural traditions and to learn directly from the practitioners.

Enlivening the Methods

Rajasthan is famed for its puppetry, as everyone knows. The Barefoot College, which already had the experience of using puppets for the communication of development messages, introduced puppetry as pedagogy in the Night Schools. Children and teachers together made the puppets, wrote the scripts and presented the programmes. The skepticism around the use of entertainment puppets dissolved quickly.

The SWRC had a Media Centre, where film strips and slides were developed. These were used for campaigns and for educating the adults about developmental issues. Some of the materials were adapted to be used for the children in the Night School. The Night Schools had a flexible approach to the use of modern technology; where it was feasible, it was adopted; where an older method would suffice, it was used. The intention was to make the school a lively place for acquiring relevant information and a positive mind set.

In this context, the Night Schools were often labelled as “non-formal” by funding agencies and others. The debate between “formal” and “non-formal” schools was found to be unproductive and the decision at Tilonia was to use the term, “alternative school”.

The Night Schools have a wide spectrum of activities and inputs, which emerged as responses to the expressed needs of the children. For example, the children wanted an opportunity to meet the children from other villages and other parts of the district. So, the idea of the Children's Fair arose, rather similar to the village fairs meant for adults, in the area. This became the Night School children's very own fair, organized annually. The fairs are held in different villages each year, with the community taking up the responsibility, through voluntary labour, for logistics and arrangements. The Annual Fair could range from one day to three days. The children look forward, excitedly, to the Fair and participate in the activities with vigour and enthusiasm. Some of them arrange for their older siblings to herd the goats on those days. The Fair has a variety of activities, which combine learning with a great deal of fun. These include games, puzzles, Origami, toy-making, use of waste material and so on.

Educational excursions and exposure trips were organized for both teachers and children. Most of them had never had an opportunity to go beyond a neighbouring village. These visits opened the world out to them and to say that the children enjoyed them, was to make an understatement. They would have loved to see a new place every week, but the Barefoot College had its constraints.

For the children, who wished to learn a skill thoroughly, a residential training period of one year was ear-marked. Sewing, fabricating at the mechanical workshop, candle-making, chalk-making and carpentry were some of the skills taught in the Night Schools and taken beyond, for advanced work.

A mobile Library functioned for the school system. This enabled children to get acquainted with the vast world of books. Although, many of them had only moderate reading levels, they could take the occasional story book home, for a week or two. Once in a while, there would be a video screening arranged for the children on themes of legal literacy, health, women's rights or environmental regeneration.

The Curriculum

The curriculum is prepared by a team, which incorporates the suggestions of the teachers, adults in the community and even the children. It is presented below:

Language: This includes reading, writing and correct articulation of Hindi, ability to express thoughts in their own words, writing formal applications for bank loans, jobs etc.

Mathematics: This includes Numbers, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, knowledge of Indian currency, measurements of length, area, weight, volume of liquids, time, knowledge of different shapes, like triangle and square; knowledge of measurement of farm land and building, quantity of soil dug in cubic feet; simple and compound interest, profit and loss, ratio and proportion, calculation of wages.

Animal Husbandry: Children learn about animals, their diet, their internal organs, their diseases and simple cures, immunisation, use of lactometer, cross breeding, artificial insemination.

Agriculture: Children learn about different types of soil, functions of different parts of a plant, various crops, disease of plants and their treatment, cross breed seeds, grafting, types of fertilisers, water and soil testing, proper storage of food grains, awareness of harmful effects of chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

Geography: This includes knowledge of directions (East, West, North, South), maps of the village and the farms, boundaries of the village, origin and shape of the earth, earthquakes, volcanoes, climate, day and night, subsoil water and its properties, geographical setting of Ajmer, map of India, the names of the Indian States.

History: Children learnt tales of local heroes, knowledge of local festivals and melas and their origin, history of their village, national festivals and tales of brave men, tales of Ramayan and Mahabharat, history of social customs, origin of man, discovery of fire and the wheel.

Knowledge of rural institutions: This covered Panchayat (local self-government), Development Officer, Pradhan (elected head of Village Council), their work and inter-relationships; Patwari (Revenue official) roles of Agricultural Extension Officer, School, Hospital and Post office, information about veterinary worker, Village Cooperative Society.

Health: Children learn about the human body, health and hygiene, importance of clean drinking water, immunisation, nutrition, symptoms of common diseases and their prevention and treatment, nutritional content of local food products.

Science: The curriculum includes air and pressure; heat as a source of energy and light, expansion due to heat; water; knowledge about space satellites; gravitational force, phases of the moon, North star, Milky Way, solar system, planets and stars.

Success Stories

There are several anecdotes and success stories, but two of them stand out for their boldness and uniqueness. One was the case of Dev Karan, the Speaker of the Children's Parliament, who was able to bring two rival politicians, together, a feat hailed by all in the village, as a miracle. The second is the story of Kaushalya, who was the Prime Minister, until she left her village to get married. As a young daughter-in-law, she was able, after months of persuasion, to get her village agree to implement a piped water supply. Single-handed, she persuaded 56 families to pay a monthly fee of Rs 20 for water connections. The result was the installation of the first solar-operated pump for filling water in a 100,000 litre tank, which supplied safe drinking water regularly, to the whole village. And this, in a State, where no village pays for water supplied by the Government. Both these examples speak for the creative energy of the children, when allowed to think and speak for themselves.