

Project Mala Schools

Places Visited: Guria, Mujhera, Hasra, Patehra, Amoi and Turkahan

Date: 1st July – 3rd July 2008

Schedule:

1st July: Guria, Mujhera and Turkahan

2nd July: Hasra, Patehra and Amoi

3rd July: Guria

Meetings Held with:

Annu

Anil

Teachers

Students

Other staff

It has always been a pleasant experience to visit the Project Mala Schools in Benaras and Mirzapur districts of Uttar Pradesh. Experiences of my recent field visit undertaken in these schools have been stated briefly below.

Guria School:

The school reopened after a gap of 15 days on the 1st of July amidst heavy rains. Seeing the weather conditions I was certain I would hardly find any children or teachers on the first day of the school. To my surprise I found 100 percent attendance among the teachers and nearly 55 children present from among the 356 who had braved it with umbrellas, polythene sheets and sacks to cover themselves.

Children looked more or less tidy and seemed to be happy to be back in school. The children from Class VI were only 15 in number out of 40 due to heavy rains.

The school is still under construction and it is believed to be completed by the end of July. Three rooms were functional and one of the rooms being Library.

No doubt the school has a set of dedicated teachers who placed their main problems in a meeting we held on a short notice. The main problems stated were that children start becoming dull from Class III onwards and lack the alertness and keen understanding to grasp and learn. The community worker also stated that the parents engage the children with harvesting and other domestic duties as the children start growing up and hence there are a few children who are irregular or stop coming altogether.

Teachers on an average were happy and were willing to learn and accept suggestions. They seem to have accepted Anu as their guide and she is in close contact with them along with the community members through the community workers. Under the guidance of Anu, the curriculum of the schools seemed to gear towards children participation and is activity based with prizes and certificates of appreciation. However a few more innovative measures could be introduced which has been stated at the end.

Punctuality has been well maintained for activities as well as meals. The school does reflect good teamwork and quality leadership through Anil's round the clock vigil including Sundays. Besides his several official job responsibilities, he is committed to several unofficial duties which he attends to with enormous efficiency and swiftness. He monitors and maintains the school punctuality, avoids any kind of wastage (such as amount to be cooked depending upon the no of children present) and maintaining a smiling face in all his interactions! Record keeping is very important and he is ready with any information required at any point of time.

Mujhera:

The entrance of the school was witnessed by a combination of two huge trees joint together – half Banyan and half mango. This was symbolic and could convey a real meaning of how the mainstreaming of marginalized children into the society is being done.

However the school building needs serious repairs. The roofs in several classes were not only dripping but sagging as well. At some point of time it could prove risky for children to sit inside. Children were made to sit in dry places of the classroom but the whole area was damp and moist.

The attendance was weak but teachers were all present. The system of punctuality and regular displays on the board outside and inside has been well maintained. At 10:40 am sharp, the no of children present are put up. Accordingly the schools decide the amount of food to be cooked. Breakfast is served on time and any left over are adjusted with the lunch quantity in order to avoid wastage and extravagance. The local produce is well utilized.

Turkahan:

This place is unbelievable! Hidden away in the remotest areas of the country where rays of civilization are yet to reach, the place is almost devoid of roads, electricity and water. Despite such hardships faced by the local natives, the place is awesome with a few stunning water falls (mainly created due to heavy rains) on the hills and dales with original tribal people around.

It took us about an hour from Mujhera. The Project Mala School situated in the midst of a tribal zone is completely cut off from civilization. Tribes such as Binds and Kols who live in this area survive in utter poverty. Children

mostly help with the grazing of cattle. The Project Mala School located in barely two small rooms has started operating. The first batch of students has just passed out. This is like a ray of sunshine for the hundreds of children of this area. This will be the biggest challenge for Project Mala. Even if a total of 30 children pass out every year from here, it will be a huge boon to the tribal people completely cut off from the world. The impact would no doubt be a rippling one covering a wide area.

We met children grazing cattle and also talked to people around. There is a severe dearth of schools and at least found more than 100 children all around who are not attending any school. Men whom we talked to said there was no other option for the children other than grazing cattle. The area is completely unfavorable to agricultural activities as the ground is hard with metamorphic rocks scattered all over. This tribal zone is yet to have roads and the rains leave no stone unturned to make it even more difficult to reach the place.

Anil's extremely skillful driving sailed the vehicle to safety through dangerous ravines and imaginary roads. He was almost navigating the vehicle carrying us in the slippery slush and water rather than driving.

People whom we talked to were enthusiastic and excited about the idea of a school coming up in the vicinity for their children. Children who had passed out from Mala School definitely were distinctly different. They knew how to address elders with respect and folded hands. Their ways and mannerisms reflect that the teachers have no doubt worked hard. There has been only one drop out.

A survey has been conducted by the Project Mala team in Turkahan. Within a distance of three kilometers, a total of 7 villages were surveyed. The survey reveals a total of 1116 children in the age group of 1 to 14 years. The maximum no of children (140) are of 8 years. Some of my observation on this survey has been stated later.

Hasra:

Children were present in much larger number even though it continued to rain on the second day. Teachers present were active and children seemed to be pretty alert too!

Patehra:

This building too had seepage on the roof although not as grave as Mujehra. The vocational activity of stitching and sewing was being imparted to the girls. Children were present in fairly high numbers despite the rains. One could see the series of sacks and polythene sheets lined up outside for drying.

Classes were nearly full with teachers teaching different subjects such as Maths, Sanskrit and English.

Children from Class VI seemed to be smarter and more fluent as compared to their counterpart in Guria. All were keen to answer and respond. Classes were clean and the system was in order. Meal times were happy and pleasant.

Amoi:

The last school visited by me was Amoi. One thing was clear about the uniqueness and oneness that was maintained throughout in terms of entrance, color of the windows and gates, system of display, activity, meal times, menu and so on. This is what is striking about all Mala schools. No matter what time you go to whichever school the system is well maintained and time is closely regulated and monitored which is a rare sight in government schools and even in many aristocrat Hi-fi formal schools. At 10:40 am the board had the display about the attendance.

Children knew exactly how to greet and how to behave with outsiders and during meal times. They stood patiently in a queue at meal times. The schools carried on till 3:30pm. Creating a system is like winning half the battle. Mala School has managed to establish the system. I think this credit goes to the dynamic leadership at the top and the staff, teachers and management who are responsible for such accuracy and efficiency.

Observations:

1. A study of records reveals that the drop out rates has been curbed to a large extent. From the enrolment numbers in the year 2005, the number of students that has passed out corresponding to the same batch in 2008 shows almost negligible drop outs. This same batch also need to be monitored further in the subsequent years to see where they have reached and how far have they been mainstreamed. Some of the places show a higher number implying that a few extra students have been incorporated from the previous years.

Table No 1

Year	Guria	Mujhera	Hasra	Patehra	Amoi	Turkahan
2005 Enrolled	103	63	53	58	54	55
2008 Passed Out	103	58	55	56	60	54

2. The survey results of Turkahan show three categories of children as under:

Age Groups	Total No Children
10-14	163
5-9	530
0-4	423

The age group 10-14 shows only 163 children in comparison to 530 children in the age group 5-9. Although they cannot be compared but nevertheless it is worth enquiring as to why the no of children suddenly drops to 163 in the higher age group.

Could it be that they migrate to other villages in search of jobs? If this is so then what percentage of these children are girls?

It is also important to study the gender division of children in the various age groups.

Since this data is already available it will be easily possible to get down to the bottom of this problem. Some of these questions need to be addressed before taking important decision for policy recommendation.

3. Keeping the UP board syllabus of Class VI in purview the drafting of the curriculum of the 3 years of non formal teaching needs to go backwards from Class VI rather than from class I. The subject of English is still a weak link among the students and among the teachers as well. It is important that children should be introduced the subject earlier in the day of some standard. Unfortunately the text book of UP board of Class VI also seems to be teaching English in the parrot method with each line being duplicated in Hindi.

The subject of science needs to be separated out from Social Science where already a huge load exists from the third year itself. The selection of topics could be in conformity with the Class VI standard although the level and depth of the topic may be limited.

4. One of the reasons for children to become dull from Class III onwards as stated by the teachers, could be attributed to the lack of understanding or the sudden burden of introducing too many topics too quickly.
5. Another important aspect which I found lacking is the involvement of parents. It is important that there be at least one annual sports and one annual concert where parents be invited to the school. The community workers and teachers need to ensure that the parents come and

participate in the annual day function or any other day suitable to all. They need to see that their children are participating in the concert. All children must be involved and need to have a small role in the concert. The parents' participation will ensure a closer bonding and will be a good opportunity for interaction with them where they can be talked and counseled to. Involvement of parents will also ensure that children are regular and do not miss their classes. Thus they will not lose interest in the subsequent classes.

6. It is necessary that there be two regular periods for the Library. Children be encouraged to read in the library and complete their homework in school. Little or no homework should be assigned for home. While talking to children I found that one particular child had not come to school because his homework was not complete. Assignments of science and social sciences could be completed with the help of books and teachers guidance in the library itself. Thus this would make the classes a teacher – children participation.
7. A news heading may be assigned to one child for collecting greater information through newspapers and other magazines available in the library and with teacher's guidance. He or she may be asked to speak on the assigned news the next day in the assembly. This will create interest among the students and enhance their general knowledge.
8. An annual outing in the form of picnic or school exchange programme may be introduced for personality enhancement. The interaction among children will increase the general awareness about their immediate neighborhood.
9. The library has collected many good literature mostly in Hindi. It needs to collect more books especially for the young ones which are basically pictorial depictions rather than text both in Hindi and English. Some of the classic stories like 'Gulliver's Travel' exists in text format which may be too difficult for the children/teachers to understand. Books such as Cindrella, Arabian Nights and other classic tales with more pictures than text needs to be collected for creating interest initially in reading. Some Enid Blyton series for the young children are also available. The library class can be converted into story telling/reading session for the small children.

Other Observations:

- The Project Mala team has also started collecting information about the number of births taking place in a month in the villages. In all there are 45 villages where this information is being collected. I did check the results being recorded in the computer on a regular basis. This information is collected by the Community worker and conveyed to the

Mala office. The data was yet to be tabulated into an understandable format.

Nevertheless the authenticity of this data is questionable unless some sample testing of the same is done. The figures obtained at times are unbelievably low or high. It will be worthwhile to check the authenticity of these figures through the information available from secondary sources. Upon talking to the community worker he was not sure about the average no of births in the villages as a whole. This needs to be checked and authenticated before accepting them.

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