

## **'No to Child Labour, Yes to Education' Unfolding of a Grass Roots Movement in Andhra Pradesh**

*Children of landless labourers in Andhra Pradesh's Ranga Reddy district now attend school instead of employing their labour to augment a meagre family income. The impetus has come from their parents who have been active participants in the process. This paper looks at the initiatives of an NGO seeking to eradicate child labour and attempts to explain why this endeavour differed from other attempts to universalise education and eradicate child labour.*

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In large parts of Ranga Reddy district of Andhra Pradesh entire village communities are saying a firm 'no' to child labour and opting to put their children in school instead. Many of these villagers are poor landless labourers who have not had the benefit of a school education themselves. Until a few years ago, they argued that their children's income and labour was crucial for the survival of their families. A good number of these children were bonded for petty sums of money to local landlords, others worked in factories or as wage labourers plucking flowers and in the cottonseed farms, and many were supplementing family labour by herding goats or performing domestic tasks. In a fairly short span of time, these very families are joining forces to make their villages child labour free and to ensure that all children are in school. Far from being dependent on their children's income, parents are now contributing towards the salary of an extra teacher in the school or pooling their labour to improve the school infrastructure. The message is clear and is spreading as more communities join in this movement and pledge to make their village child labour free.

What provides the impetus for this movement and how is it different from other attempts to universalise education and eliminate child labour?<sup>1</sup> What makes it a movement as opposed to a project? How does it generate an interactive involvement of different stakeholders? Can the process be replicated in other areas? How is interest in the issue sustained and maintained beyond the involvement of the external agent? Are there any prospects of sustainability? This paper provides a series of snapshots that illustrate some key dimensions of this movement as well as documents the processes by which it is evolving.

### **The MV Foundation**

The catalyst of this grass roots movement is the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MV Foundation) – a local NGO – that has been working in Ranga Reddy district of Andhra Pradesh since 1991. MV Foundation has achieved remarkable success in this short period of time. By 1999, its presence was firmly established in 500 villages, covering more than half the district. In 400 of these villages, every child in the 5-11 age group was in school. Nearly 1,50,000 children had been enrolled and retained in schools, more than 4,000 bonded child labourers had been released, and 168 villages were child labour free. The last two years have seen a further consolidation of the programme in terms of impact and coverage, both within Ranga Reddy district as well as in other districts. As at end 2001, MV Foundation was active in a total of eight districts and 2,500 villages in Andhra Pradesh including its traditional base in Ranga Reddy.

The MV Foundation has developed a set of inter-linked strategies to achieve these results.<sup>2</sup> Briefly stated, the programme starts by stimulating an awareness and demand for education among the poor. This demand is not restricted to parents of poor children alone but includes all stakeholders such as teachers, employers of children, youth groups, women's groups, elected local representatives and district and state government officials. Since MV Foundation does not believe in setting up a parallel school system, it works towards strengthening the existing school system. At the core of MV Foundation's strategy for transforming children from labourers to students are the residential bridge camps where children who have never been to school are prepared to enter the formal school system in the class appropriate to their age. A special attempt is made to recruit and retain girl children and to involve the entire community in developing strategies for reaching out to this group. Additional teachers –

trained in pedagogy, mobilisation and motivation techniques – are assigned to schools to enable them to cope with the influx of students who enrol as a result of the Foundation's efforts. The entire community is made responsible for defining the needs of the school and for making sure that children don't drop out. The issue of quality of education is also beginning to emerge as an important agenda item.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of MV Foundation's approach is that it challenges mainstream views on related issues of child labour, education and poverty. The organisation recognises poverty as a determinant of child labour but it holds social and cultural factors to be equally responsible for creating a climate that condones the existence of working and non school-going children. Rather than taking the passive approach of waiting for poverty to be eradicated, it works towards the creation of an awareness and demand for education among the poor. The status quo is challenged to a point where there is consensus about the norm that every child should be in school, and outrage is expressed at the existence of child labour.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the switch from child labour to school becomes a route for escaping poverty as educational qualification is universally accepted as a stepping stone to a higher income trajectory in the future. This means turning around deep-seated value systems and changing mindsets – of the poor, as also of society at large. This working philosophy is expressed in MV Foundation's charter of 'non-negotiable' principles that can be summed up in one single sentence: no child should be at work and all children should be in school.<sup>4</sup> What follows provides some glimpses of how this philosophy is being operationalised by MV Foundation.

### **Creating Local Ownership**

While many agencies are effective in mounting rousing mobilisation campaigns and in uncovering the latent demand for education, few succeed in converting this advantage into a programme that is sustainable and on a scale that is significant enough to make an impact on child labour and education statistics. Much of the success of MV Foundation in achieving this is a consequence of its philosophy of inclusion. It works to create a consensus on the issues of child labour and education that includes the entire village and not just the parents of working children. Once the new norms are established, it is difficult for the community to slide back to status quo ante. Another key feature of its strategy is to involve the community in the ownership and management of the programme. In every village, local volunteers have internalised the basic philosophy and asserted local ownership of the programme. They work on their own initiative to eradicate child labour and convince parents to send their children to school.

It is not difficult to find villages that consider themselves a part of the MV Foundation movement even though they are not formally covered by the programme. Through their own efforts they mobilise the school and community and achieve remarkable improvements in school enrolment rates and removal of children from work. Conversely, in other villages that do belong to the programme, villagers or panchayat members talk about 'their' programme and the innovative means 'they' have found for getting children out of bonded labour, encouraging girls to join school, or stopping or postponing child marriages – sometimes without once mentioning the MV Foundation. This kind of genuine and wide ownership is perhaps the best guarantee for the sustainability and replicability of the programme – an aspect that most development projects struggle with unsuccessfully.

### **Dissemination through Grass Roots Initiatives**

The MV Foundation programme has also sparked off a ripple effect that is going beyond its original project base with local groups taking the initiative to replicate the activities in their own villages. The process by which the programme is gaining momentum is in itself illustrative. In fact, there isn't one grand pre-fabricated process that is being followed but several smaller ones that are unfolding spontaneously at the local level. They share a common objective, which is to strengthen local efforts and local institutions to take on the issues of child labour and education. In some instances it is the school head master who carries the message with him when he is transferred to another school. In others, people hear about MV Foundation from their friends or relatives and their curiosity is aroused. Public rallies, theatre, mobilisation

campaigns and the media all play a part in sensitising communities and increasing awareness. Youth groups, politicians, school education committees and village panchayats from neighbouring areas regularly contact MV Foundation to find out how they can replicate the activities. Sometimes local newspapers carry articles castigating MV Foundation for ignoring their village and leaving it out of the programme.

Achieving 100 per cent enrolment and eradicating child labour have become a source of prestige and pride for villagers and there is a healthy spirit of competition in making villages child labour free. People are beginning to say "If an NGO can do it why can't we do it ourselves for our village". MV Foundation has a policy of not turning anyone away and it supports a range of people's initiatives by providing them with information, training and in some instances with small seed grants that can be used to leverage funds from the community and other sources. Interaction with MV Foundation gives a stamp of legitimacy to local initiatives, but, more importantly, it makes them part of a wider movement. The following example from Athmakur (S) mandal of Nalagonda district is illustrative.

A local youth from this mandal had heard about the activities of MV Foundation in Ranga Reddy district from a friend. He was an active member of his local youth club and had been involved with several social projects like the Pulse Polio campaign and government health camps but was dissatisfied and wanted to do more. At the suggestion of his friend he attended a couple of youth meetings organised by MV Foundation. This inspired him to rally support from 60 youth volunteers and together they approached MV Foundation with a request to start working in their mandal. MV Foundation responded by inviting the group to an exposure workshop and by arranging field visits so that they could see the activities at first hand. They also encouraged them to go back and conduct a survey of child labour in their mandal and offered to train them in survey techniques. The youth group agreed to this and in addition took on the tasks of mobilising parents and teachers and conducting workshops to draw up an action plan. By the time MV Foundation was in a position to extend its activities to Athmakur (S), the groundwork for launching the programme and ensuring its ownership and acceptability had already been laid.

### **Going beyond Traditional Stakeholders**

A key feature of MV Foundation's approach is that it goes beyond poor parents and wins over and incorporates the key 'adversaries' – the local employers of child labour, teachers, the education bureaucracy and policy-makers – and makes them advocates for the rights of the child. As the programme grows in scope and complexity, new and perhaps unusual partnerships are emerging around the issues of child labour and education. A recent example is provided by developments in Kulkacherala mandal, where politicians from the three main parties – BJP, Congress and Telegu Desam Party (TDP) – have united to form the 'Baalala Hakkula Parirakshana Rajakiya Aikyavedika' or United Political Forum for the Liberation of Child Labour.

Kulkacherala mandal is a very backward area, with a large tribal and dalit population and a history of outmigration. Putting children's issue on the political agenda is likely to be crucial in ensuring the acceptance of the programme in what is a new geographical location for MV Foundation. This unconventional alliance was triggered off by MV Foundation when it sought the help of local politicians in stopping the marriage of a nine year old girl who was in class 4. The politicians agreed to visit the parents of this girl and were successful in convincing them to stop the marriage and send the girl back to school. It was then brought to their notice that another child marriage was due to take place the same day and they proceeded to stop that one as well. This first attempt at joint action proved to be a transforming experience for these politicians who had never collaborated on any issue before. They held a meeting the same evening and agreed to set up a joint platform for tackling not just child marriage but also child labour and to campaign against this in the entire mandal.

These deliberations resulted in the formal establishment of Aikyavedika on March 4, 2001. The aim of this forum is to get every child in the mandal into school. At present there are 15 active members but they have the support of their party cadres when needed. The core group

meets fortnightly to discuss strategies for removing children from bonded labour and more particularly from the cotton seed farms that have proliferated in this area. They also respond to requests from local groups to address meetings and mobilise the community. A joint decision has been taken not to make any party political mileage from these activities. In the words of T Ramachander, the TDP representative, "At election time we have our own agenda and go our separate ways but we are united on the issue of education and child labour. We remove our flags – metaphorically speaking – when we come to these meetings". The success of this partnership in Kulkacherala mandal has sparked off similar attempts in Nawabpet and Marpalli mandals.

### **Uniting Youth against Child Labour**

Village youth have long proved to be among the best allies of MV Foundation in conducting and sustaining the fight against child labour. As first generation literates, they have had to undergo a similar struggle to get educated and are therefore in the best position to reach out to the community and convince them of the dignity that formal education can give. In Nalagonda district too, MV Foundation has been able to involve local youth as the engine for disseminating its programme. What makes this case different is that this is a politically active area with a background of youth militancy. Village youth are involved in politics through their membership in youth clubs, each of which is linked to a specific political party. It is also a traditionally left leaning area, the population is extremely vocal and topics such as privatisation, globalisation and WTO make up the stuff of everyday discourse.

Youth are active in mobilising around issues such as dalit rights, land rights, bonded labour and wages. As in other districts, here too poverty is seen as the main cause of child labour and the underlying assumption is that once poverty is eradicated all other aspects of development will follow. There is also some scepticism about the role of NGOs and their ability to take on community issues. It was against this challenging ideological backdrop that MV Foundation initiated its work in Nalagonda district in November 1999 with the primary intention of training a group of 60 youth from Athmakur (s) mandal who had requested MV Foundation's assistance in replicating the programme in their area (see above).

Initially there was resistance to MV Foundation's presence in the district and party workers would attend meetings with the sole intention of questioning the approach and philosophy of MV Foundation but with each interaction they would leave a little more convinced by MV Foundation's child rights perspective. Field visits and exposure to the programme in Ranga Reddy district increasingly converted the remaining sceptics to the view that it was possible to convince poor parents to send their children to school. They also began to see that the issue of child rights could bring all political parties together in a common agenda to abolish child labour. These youths then started roping in their comrades and a large number of youth are now volunteering their services to MV Foundation and are contributing to the rapid acceptance and dissemination of the programme in this district.

The story of Sriramulu, a party worker for CPI-M in Penpahad mandal, is fairly typical. He first encountered MV Foundation when it set up its office in Suryapet next to the office of CPI-M office. He was puzzled by MV Foundation – it presented him with an ideological challenge as it stood conventional wisdom on its head. He started attending meetings, spoke to youth activists and visited the bridge course camps where children released from labour are prepared for entry into formal school. His initial disbelief soon turned to conviction and he was successful in organising a group of his comrades who were ready to start the programme in their mandal. With some encouragement from MV Foundation, they conducted a survey, organised rallies, cultural programmes and an enrolment programme. At first these initiatives met with a lot of resistance from teachers and also from parents, who went so far as to threaten to burn them. A sensitisation campaign followed and, according to Sriramulu, "at least the parents now say namaskar to us. They offer us tea instead of kerosene!" For the first year these activities were run entirely by youth volunteers. Since April 2001, Penpahad mandal is formally under the aegis of MV Foundation and Sriramulu is in charge of running the programme.

MV Foundation has made remarkable and rapid progress in Nalagonda district and in the space of one and a half years the programme had expanded to 12 mandals in this district, covering 549 villages. This could happen largely because the organisation was able to tap into the energies of local youth. These youth already had a background of social activism, group formation and mobilisation and the issue of child rights provided them with another platform for assertion of rights. It is also an issue that has enabled them to transcend long-standing political differences to unite in the fight against child labour. They have formed village level forums for the protection of child rights and are working together to bring children to school.

### **The Suryapet Declaration**

The culmination of this process of intense mobilisation in Nalagonda district was a mass meeting held in Suryapet on November 24, 2001. The impetus came from the MV Foundation Mandal organisers who wanted to have a "training programme for all sections of society in one go". The purpose of this meeting was to focus attention on the prevalence of child labour and bonded labour in the district and to create the mood for an open dialogue, debate and discussion on the abolition of child labour.

The organisation of the meeting was a participatory effort with discussions held at the village, cluster and district level and involving village panchayats, local officials, youth groups and school education committees. Youth belonging to different political parties worked together to mobilise support and even some local landlords pitched in by providing tractors to transport people to the event. Interest in the meeting surpassed all expectations as nearly 20,000 people, including children recently released from bonded labour, showed up on the day. The panel of guests included MV Foundation staff, the district collector, the local MLA, the municipal chairman, leading academics and the education minister, Kadiyam Srihari, as the chief guest. Speeches by invited guests were interspersed with cultural activities organised by local youth. The minister made a declaration in his speech – which he called the Suryapet Declaration – that every child in the state should attend school. The minister's commitment to this cause on a public platform was a significant event that gave a lot of confidence and energy to the youth groups in Nalagonda district.

### **Learning Guarantee Programme**

Recently, MV Foundation has started working with the schools, parents and the community to define the concept of quality of education and to convert this into a programme that will show tangible results in the children. This is happening in response to a demand from parents, and frequently from schoolteachers. The issue has also been coming up regularly in MV Foundation internal reviews where it has been noted that there is a shift in community perceptions about what constitutes quality. At first, it simply meant a school with regular teacher attendance; then a school that was successful in retaining children, particularly older children, and more recently, attention is shifting to the learning that takes place in school. Not surprisingly, the push for quality is most evident in villages where the community has been mobilised and has been successful in achieving 100 per cent enrolment.

In Chandippa village in Ranga Reddy district, Narasimha, the headmaster of the upper primary school says that parents were beginning to express dissatisfaction with learning levels. A parent came to him complaining that his son who was in class 5 could not read a wedding invitation card that the family had received. The head master decided to dramatise the situation and agreed to sign a contract with the parent saying that if the child was sent to school regularly he would guarantee reading, writing and mathematical competency. This incident was publicised throughout the village by the parent and spurred the school to evaluate the learning levels of all children. Question papers developed by DPEP for class 1 and 2 were used to test all children up to class 5. The teachers were shocked to discover that even children in class 5 were lacking in the mathematical skills that they should have picked up in class 1 and 2.

A similar exercise was conducted by the upper primary school in Mokila village, also in Ranga Reddy district, with similarly disastrous results. Here, the school found that only 2 of the 45 children in class 4 were up to the standards they should have achieved by class 2. It is worth bearing in mind that in both villages all children in the 6-10 age group are in school. These schools have been in the forefront in mobilising parents, releasing children from labour, ensuring attendance, and initiating infrastructural improvements. The teachers are members of the Bala Karmika Vimochana Vedika (BKVV) or Teachers' Forum against Child Labour and are committed to eradicating child labour and universalising education. Hence it was all the more disturbing for them to realise that bringing children to school and keeping them there was not enough. They were failing in their role of imparting learning to children.

In the summer of 2001, MV Foundation started raising the issue of quality of education systematically in a series of meetings with BKVV members, youth groups, teachers and parents. The government sponsored Chittoor study that revealed that only 15 per cent of children were up to the mark in each class was used as the basis for triggering discussion. The time was ripe for starting this debate that had been slowly gathering momentum in different quarters. One of the conclusions that emerged from these discussions was that by failing to guarantee quality education the school was denying children their rights. The Learning Guarantee Programme was launched on an experimental basis in eight schools towards the end of 2001, with the Chandippa and Mokila schools among those that volunteered to be part of this initial programme. An external specialist is working intensively with these schools to train them in evaluation techniques, activity based learning and academic planning. Classes have been merged and then regrouped according to competencies. Course books have been set aside and the focus has shifted to the individual child and to creating an environment that is conducive to learning. This is being done for a three-month remedial period at the end of which children will be re-tested to assess the improvements that are made with the introduction of improved pedagogical techniques. Bala Kumari, a teacher from Mokila village, sums up the views of the teachers involved in this experiment: "I am very happy. I have more satisfaction now but I also feel guilty. I thought I was teaching but I realise that I wasn't doing anything in the last five years since I became a teacher. What a wasted opportunity!"

Parents, as well as the entire village community, are involved in this process. The schools have had to convene meetings with parents to explain to them that the school has been falling behind in guaranteeing education to children. They have also had to secure the parents' agreement to the temporary regrouping of classes. MV Foundation is preparing the community simultaneously to understand the objectives of the learning guarantee programme. They are being trained to ask technical questions about quality, such as, 'what should a child know in class 4?' Once this experimental period is concluded and the results are evaluated, MV Foundation plans to launch a major campaign on quality throughout its programme area. Four of the eight initial participants will act as resource schools from where the programme will be disseminated to all schools.

This drive for quality education is likely to stand a better chance of success than other top-down attempts to improve education in the government school system. What sets this experience apart is that the demand is coming from the parents and the community. They are being prepared to give shape and articulation to this demand, with MV Foundation providing the concrete inputs that will make it a reality. This is no longer an issue just for the schools – they will be held accountable and judged by the users of the system.

### **Conclusions**

The anecdotal evidence provided above illustrates the mechanisms by which the MV Foundation programme is growing and unfolding. It has avoided being boxed into the confines of a project format with its inevitable and well-circumscribed boundaries. Instead, it has evolved organically through the mobilisation of local initiatives and stakeholders who come to share a common philosophical approach to child labour and education. The examples provide partial insights and answers to the questions raised at the outset: how does a project become

a movement? How does a movement become sustainable? How does it take root and come to be owned and driven by the initiative of local stakeholders?

One crucial organisational feature of MV Foundation's approach has been the conscious rejection of a hierarchical or directive structure that is imposed from outside. All efforts to build consensus and overcome opposition take place at the local level and their aim is to create new societal norms about children that are universally accepted. Villages wishing to join the programme do so of their own volition and in realisation of the intrinsic worth of education. They come with the demand, looking for ways to meet it through processes and mechanisms that interface with their lives and their local capabilities. MV Foundation staff serves as a catalyst to this process, encouraging it, providing it with organisational tools and with the relevant resources and knowledge inputs derived from their wider experience.

A second, vital feature reflects the organisation's belief in following a socially inclusive approach leading to locally embedded interactions with a wide range of stakeholders: parents, teachers, employers, government officials and above all the children themselves. Agency rests crucially with children themselves who act as interlocutors with their non-school going peers and their families. However, there is a clear recognition that this would not be enough if it were confronted by teacher apathy, bureaucratic indifference and employers' resistance. What is effectively sought through this inclusive approach is a change in the values and norms that were previously acting as constraints to universal education and the elimination of child labour.

From this follows the third key feature, namely, the creation of local ownership of the initiative as well as of the processes and movement that originated from it. Child labour becomes everybody's problem and getting children to school a shared responsibility. This means that the effort put in by MV Foundation is multiplied manifold by the contributions of the community. It has been observed that for every child withdrawn from work by MV Foundation staff, an additional three or four are enrolled in schools through community initiatives. Widespread acceptance of the norm that children should be in school and not at work has meant that MV Foundation can reduce its role and presence over a period of time. Already, in Ranga Reddy district 73 villages have reached a stage where they can implement the programme independently. MV Foundation has started delegating responsibility in these villages to local groups ranging from youth groups, School Education Committees and women's groups.

Fourth, the programme has sparked off a ripple transmission effect that is going beyond MV Foundation's operational base. The potential impact of these local efforts linking together in a movement against child labour and in favour of universal education can be quite significant. Villages that have succeeded in becoming child labour free become an example and a source of healthy competition for other villages driven to achieve the same status. This mode of self-propelling dissemination serves to reproduce not only the outcomes with respect to the elimination of child labour but, perhaps more significantly, also provides a widening of the social space in which the old value systems are questioned and replaced.

But dissemination is not restricted to this form of spontaneous horizontal expansion. MV Foundation has been successful in forming partnerships with other like-minded organisations, both in Andhra Pradesh as well as in the rest of India and has been active in assisting and training NGOs to replicate its programme strategies. An equally important development is the impact on the state government's policies and programmes. This is visible both at the local level, where the education bureaucracy interfaces with the working child and its family, as well as at the state-wide level, where the residential camp model developed by MV Foundation is being used as a strategy for preparing drop outs, out of school children and working children for entry into the formal school system. This model has also been adopted by the World Bank's District Poverty Initiatives Programme.

Finally, the most intriguing dimension of the evolution of this local movement has been the phenomenon of spillover effects into other aspects of social life. The case of child marriage has been documented already. Field experience provides widespread evidence of other areas

such as dowry, domestic violence, family break up, alcoholism, gender attitudes and budgetary changes within the family to cover the costs of schooling. The list can be extended. These spillovers are not created by design but arise as the outcome of the day to day challenges encountered by the movement at local level and are firmly grounded in local discourse and debate. No doubt, many of these spillovers are contending with deep-rooted biases and structural obstacles and profound as their significance is likely to be, they have not led to a broadening of the original mandate of MV Foundation. This remains squarely focused on universalisation of education and elimination of child labour. These spillover effects enter the wider realms of civil society where the community itself finds local solutions for them. While the such developments may not show up in the statistics on the returns to education, their value cannot be overestimated.

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### Notes

[This paper has been written on the basis of information gathered during field visits to the MV Foundation in October 1998, April 2000 and December 2001.]

- 1 For a detailed account of the role played by NGOs in delivering education programmes in India, see Wazir 2000.
- 2 For a detailed account of the mandate, approach and strategies of MV Foundation see MV Foundation Annual Reports 1996-97, 1997-98, 2000-2001; Wazir 2002.
- 3 No distinction is made between hazardous and non-hazardous labour nor between child work and child labour. MV Foundation considers every child out of school to be an exploited child who is being denied the right to education and to development.
- 4 These ideas are developed in detail in Sinha (2000).

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