

YOUTH ACTIVISTS FOR ELIMINATION OF CHILD LABOUR THROUGH UNIVERSALISATION OF EDUCATION

Experiences of MVFoundation

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Introduction :

There are innumerable challenges to the launching of the programme of elimination of child labour through Universalisation of Education. Hundreds of local quarrels, disputes and conflicts in the community and within the family are being resolved through discussions and debates. In fact consensus building exercise is precisely an outcome of such negotiations and persuasions of all those in authority, schoolteachers, officials, employers, parents themselves or by protagonists of child rights to liberate them from exploitation and drudgery. For every child there is a plan. To capture the mood of tremendous possibilities and intense action on the grounds is indeed a challenging task.

This case study has two parts. Part I gives a general picture of the youth activists and their activities. Part II gives in detail the case study of a village which has seen tremendous progress due to the unstinting support of the youth.

Part I

Involvement of Local Youth

Village youth have long proved to be among the best allies of the M.V.Foundation in its campaign against child labour. They assist the programme in several ways. In some areas they have formed village level forums for the protection of child rights in the belief that they can achieve more as a group than an individuals. They debate, argue and contest long held positions about the link between poverty and child labour and work ceaselessly to create a societal consensus on the protection of child rights. They keep the discussion on these topics alive by convening meetings with the community and with SECs. They monitor the progress of the children who have left the bridge camps and joined the ashram schools, organise shramdan or voluntary labour for improving the school environment, intervene in child marriages and access medical help, when needed, for the community. Village youth are getting involved in a wide range of socially useful work that creates an environment that is conducive to sending children to school and keeping them there. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the active help and support of local youth has been indispensable in achieving the rapid spread and dissemination of the programme.

They debated, pleaded, argued and contested all the status quoist positions on child labour. They bore the brunt of massive resistance to their interventions. They enjoyed the new found strength in the strategy of inclusion of every one in the society. They worked hard to win over even those who had vehemently opposed them and their families for they



knew that the real victory for children lay in a societal consensus on protecting their rights.

Rallies and Padayatras

A major activity taken up by the youth, were the public marches ‘padayatras’ from one village to another in the scorching heat and also cold nights. In each mandal this march is inaugurated by the local leaders after which the youth walk 12 to 15 kilometers a day singing songs, talking to passers by and spreading the word that ‘child labour would no longer be tolerated’. They enter a village and initially establish contacts with the more vocal and influential persons, conduct a rally in the village and organize a public meeting. During the course of the day they make a quick assessment of the profile of children in the village, the members in school and out of schools, the lists of bonded labourers and their employers, and also girls whose marriages have been fixed. All this is shared in the public meeting.

In each village the volunteers contacted almost every villager about the programme for abolition of child labour. They are all invited to attend the public meeting in the night in which they put up a cultural programme. In the public meeting the villagers were addressed by the school headmaster, sarpanch and also some local leaders. There are some occasions when the youth could not find permission to stay in the school or the premises of the Gram Panchayat and therefore, exposed to the open place in cold wintry nights. In spite of it they found no reason to complain because they were all in one team and highly motivated. They remembered the hospitality offered in other villages which was so spontaneous and found solace in such good gestures. During the rallies, youth were also trained to hold review meetings each day and plan for the next day. They were divided into committees to distribute responsibility regarding establishing contacts, logistics of public meetings, cultural shows, food and accommodation and bringing out a bulletin every day. Through the rally contacted some hundreds of villagers have been contacted involving all local leaders including the MLA.

The youth had to form into committees to share responsibilities of food, accommodation, water, health, and public relations during the march. Sometimes they even got wet as they got caught in the rains. It was a great exposure to the youth as they began to notice innumerable hardships faced by children in their daily lives. Girls who were married and separated, bonded labourers, neglected children, all came to the forefront. In many villages the group was welcomed and this gave a feeling that they were all participating in a movement against child labour.

At the end of the padayatra, the youth discovered themselves as a team who shared knowledge about the lives of children in their village, the condition of local schools, and the enthusiasm or lack of it among the partners in the community. They learnt how to take decisions in a democratic fashion, conduct review meetings and the rudiments of ‘inclusion’ as a strategy. They also became united as a ‘solidarity group’ who enjoyed the rains, mosquito bites, lack of water and food occasionally, as they were registered as challenges rather than disadvantages. The Padayatra culminated in a public meeting.



Youth Participation in Survey

In all the villages, survey of children in school and out of school was carried out by the youth volunteers. More than fifteen thousand households were covered under the survey. This was also a part of the mobilization campaign in the villages. At the end of the survey gramsabhas were held in most of the villages and the numbers of children who were out of schools were publicly announced. The meeting was attended by sarpanch, chairperson of SEC among others in which they had also expressed their commitment to bring every child to school. The specific names of children who are out of schools are maintained at the village level and are reference points to work out strategies for withdrawing children from work and joining them into schools.

The survey was utilized, as a tool to establish contacts with all the potential partners in the programme there was also an open and public debate on the question of child labour and education. In many of the villages the sarpanch, MPTC extended full co-operation to survey activities. During the process of survey several children in the 5-8 age group were enrolled directly into schools.

The purpose of survey was enumerated as being a tool to identify every child out of school and also establish contacts with potential partners in the village. The youth were also told that the survey was not just about numbers but also about the lives of each and every individual child and his /her future.

Since the survey was conducted during monsoons in some districts the youth faced difficulties in reaching to the village and contacting every household. In fact, at times they even went without food because they were not able to get dry fuel wood for cooking. During the survey they met local leaders, Sarpanches, schools teachers and youth groups. Many of them assisted them in the process. This helped in understanding who the allies were in the campaign against child labour and also in strategizing for eventual withdrawal of children from work. The survey also generated a debate and discussion on the issue of children's education.

Data of children in schools was also collected from the attendance register in the school It was not easy to get specific information from some of the school headmasters as they felt suspicious about the purpose of such an exercise. In order to clarify that all this was being done in the genuine interest of children some of them agreed to share the information. Wherever possible there was also a meeting with the BKVV asking them to talk to teachers about the need to collaborate with MVF on the programme.

Motivating Parents

The support of parents to the programme is remarkable. On many occasions they have willingly sent their children to schools. Some of them expressed their apprehensions and



anxieties about the school system, and in response the youth offered help to stand by them in their endeavour to send children to schools.

Many a parent were impressed by the tenacity of the youth volunteers and yielded to their arguments because they found them so persuasive. They were touched by the fact that on no occasion they rebuked or were disrespectful towards them. They wondered at the patience of the youth and agreed to send children because they felt obliged to the youth and their commitment.

The following case study gives some examples of inclusion of the youth in the programme. It is a narration of their role in mobilizing support and motivating communities in joining the campaign against child labour; establishing contacts with the gram panchayat and involving the Sarpanch in the programme; bringing pressure on schools; taking on employers and even facing their wrath; organizing meetings in expression of solidarity.

Part II

A Case Study of Ravulapally Village

MVF entered the Ravulapally community in 1992 at which time there were 25 bonded child labourers and 200 child labourers in the village. In Ravulapally, as in many other villages, the initial reaction to MVF and its volunteers was violent. Parents misunderstood the message of the movement and resented the volunteers' stance on child labour. It was only after much time and through their use of key techniques, such as motivation camps to interact with the children and meetings with community members, that MVF was able to convey the initial message that a child's place is in the classroom. This was an important first step, but the overall success of MVF's program was dependent on many other factors, not least of which was the participation of the youth within the community.

The Youth Club of Ravulapally has been meeting officially since 1996. These young people initially worked in the community cleaning up, weeding the schoolyard and public spaces. In 1996 the headmaster of the school requested the group's cooperation and partnership in the effort to eliminate child labour. With MVF's encouragement they took up the cause. After this, the Youth Club began actively participating in motivating



children through street theater, visiting homes where child labourers lived and organizing cultural programs.

They have taken on many of the challenges related to the elimination of child labour and the universalisation of education. On the most basic level, the youth have taken it upon themselves to motivate children to attend school, to monitor attendance and to follow up with drop-outs. On a higher level, they have dealt with issues related to village and school infrastructure, school upkeep and teacher availability.

In 1998 the youth opened a study center that was available from 9:00-11:00 every morning for children who were still working. Here the children were introduced to learning and motivated to join school. After some time at the center most children left work and began to attend the bridge course camps.

For those children held in bonded labour, the youth had to take special means. They worked diligently with landlords and parents to convince them of the need to send children to school. Where necessary, youth threatened landlords with government action, as bonded labour is against Indian law. Many landlords not only let the children go, but also cancelled all the debt against them. Youth also met with parents to convince them to take on their own work and allow their children to attend school. If these attempts were not successful, youth volunteers encouraged children to run away to the residential camps, where they could live and attend school.

Similarly to children held in bonded labour, the youth faced special problems with girl children. Oftentimes parents felt it was in the family's and the girl's best interest to have her married at a young age. The youth worked with the families to convince them that even girl children should attend school. For many parents this was a difficult decision. In their mind educating a girl was not only a wasted investment, as she would soon after be married and move in with her husband's family, but also was a risk, as men's families often demanded higher dowries for older and more educated girls. The youth worked to combat these beliefs and also to show why educating girls was beneficial for the entire



community. Through time and effort most families were convinced. As with the bonded labourers, if attempts were unsuccessful, youth encouraged the girls to run away to the residential camps.

However, the youth realized that enrolling children in school was not enough. Attendance was one of the largest obstacles facing these children as they are quickly and easily drawn back into the labour force. To combat this, the Youth Club institutionalized a strict attendance regime. They keep very thorough records on all students, even those who attend schools in neighboring villages. With the help of the youth, the Gram Panchayat board members, who are directly responsible for any child in their jurisdiction not attending class, have been able to ensure that all children in their jurisdiction are attending classes.

If a child is missing classes the teachers will assess whether they feel the absenteeism has been constant. If believed to be a perpetual problem teachers will recommend that the student go to a Residential Welfare School in a neighbouring town, providing a space free of parental and other pressures. The youth will meet with the parents and convince them to send their children to the hostel. With the assistance of the youth 10 students from Ravulapally have moved on to study at a residential school. As time progressed, the youth were able to move some of this work to the teachers, headmasters and community members. As a result, the whole community works together to motivate families to keep their children in school. This entire process has helped to create an environment in which children attend school until the completion of X standard.

Apart from school attendance, another large obstacle in the way of proper schooling is the infrastructure of the schools and the villages. For many children the problems of getting to school, having a school to go to and having teachers and supplies once they get there are just as difficult as the problem of being able to attend school. The youth approached these problems with determination. To start with, they took it upon themselves to petition government officials for improvements in road systems. As a result roads were constructed through "Sramadanam". They also submitted petitions repeatedly



to Collector, DEO, Commissioner, Education Secretary for teachers and accomodation problems

Additionally, the youth implemented a ration card program whereby each family gives Rs. 5 for their Ration Cards. If a family refuses to give the money for any reason their rations were often held back or diminished. They also worked to motivate the community for additional donations. With the money collected they were able to depute two additional teachers when enrolment increased, to improve the school infrastructure and to expand the school to include classes VIII, IX and X. With the remaining money they were able to offer a prize to the student who stood first in class VII. They also held games on the 15th of August and the 26th of January and distributed prizes to the winners. Through all their work the youth were able to improve not only the schools, but also the morale of the children, leading to improved school attendance and increased dedication to education.

As a result of all this hard work, Ravulapally now has members who hold government jobs, positions that have not before existed within the community population. The youth presence in these initiatives was instrumental and their efforts continue today as the group has developed a sense of responsibility and pride in its role within the community. Currenly 94% of children in the age group of 9-14 years are attending school. Currently the village has school up to Xth class. In 2006 girl youth committees have also been formed in the village to monitor dropouts and encourage children in high schools to continue their education. Child marriage cases are also followed up on case to case basis by these committees with the help of the Gram Panchayats until each marriage is nullified. The accomplishments provide the youth with a sense of empowerment and responsibility that fuels their motivation to continue the work. They now have a purpose, are respected in the community and empowered as advocates and champions.

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