

MVF India – Education as Empowerment

SUCHETA MAHAJAN

Dr. Sucheta Mahajan is a Reader, Delhi College of Arts and Commerce, University of Delhi; her widely published works cover twentieth century history and politics.

The following article, assessing the work of MVF, is based on the author's field visits to Ranga Reddy district from 1998 onwards. MVF has shot into prominence lately as its moving spirit, Shanta Sinha, the daughter of its founder (Former MP M. Anandam), has been awarded the Ramon Magsaysay award for her work in child labour in Andhra Pradesh.

— Editor

The experience of MVF is particularly important in the context of the decline of government institutions and apathy of most institutional structures. Where other NGOs pit themselves against government and inhabit the terrain of radical politics, MVF occupies the middle ground from where it can simultaneously trigger the process of rejuvenation of defunct government institutions and mobilise people to access them. The MVF is not oppositional in its approach, its self-image is that of a facilitator, infusing life into inert institutions set up by the government, strengthening the fabric of civil society, contributing to good governance by enabling people to access programmes and policies intended for them. This makes the programmes tools of empowerment, which provide the people the wherewith to determine what sort of development they want. Empowerment implies restoring to people agency in the process of social transformation where government institutions are merely instruments in the hands of the people rather than government being the center of all power before which people are humble supplicants. This results in deepening of democracy and discovering its revolutionary potential as a system of government which is pro-people. Today the organisation has reached, 2,40,000 children in 4300 villages spread over eight districts of Andhra Pradesh.

MVF (M. Vekatarangaiya Foundation) began work in the field of child labour in 1991 in three villages of Ranga Reddy district in the backward region of Telengana in the State of Andhra Pradesh. In terms of literacy, 69 per cent children enrolled in schools drop out between classes I and VII. Child marriage is prevalent and girls get married off between the ages of eight and 14. From issues of land, housing and minimum wages and running of cooperatives and non-formal education centres MVF moved to a focus on bonded labour and education and more recently child marriages and other problems faced by the girl child. The focus group was initially the Scheduled Caste community but it widened to include all children and all sections of the village community, including local government officials. Policy-makers at all levels have been influenced, from district officials to elected representatives to local bodies to State level officials. By 2000 MVF had implemented its programme in 18 mandals, 500 villages of Ranga Reddy district, covering over 1,50,000 children. 4000 bonded labourers have been released and 85 villages have been made child labour free. As a result of the efforts of 1600 education activists supported by 8000 youth volunteers, in 168 villages every child in the 5-14 age group is in school. In 400 villages every child in the 5-11 years age

group is in school. These include 5000 adolescent girls, a group which has traditionally been denied access to education because of the institution of child marriage.

The issues for action are release of bonded labour, girl children and child marriages, strengthening of middle and high schools, training of all Stakeholders and development of strong non-MVF groups. Organisations and institutional structures created by MVF are school education committees, child rights/girl child rights protection committees, mother's committees, youth organisations for liberation of child labour, Baala Karmika Vimochana Vedika Teachers Forum and Gram Panchayat Members Action Forum for Child Rights. The MVF model is now being extended elsewhere by networking with other NGOs in the state and at the all India level. Sensitisation and orientation of government officials to the issues of bonded labour, universalisation of elementary education and practical training in implementation of programmes such as bridge courses and 'back to school' is undertaken.

II. MVF's Perspective on Child Labour

The policies of the organisation have evolved from a perspective on child labour, which has been formalised as 'non-negotiables' in what is now termed a charter of basic principles for emancipation of child labour.

1. All children must attend full-time formal day schools.
2. Any child out of school is a child labourer.
3. All work/labour is hazardous and harms the overall growth of the child.
4. There must be total abolition of child labour. Laws regulating child labour are unacceptable.
5. Any justification perpetuating the existence of child labour must be condemned.

This perspective questions the conventional distinction between hazardous and exploitative labour and other kinds of child work, for instance, house work. The strength of this perspective comes from it being the basis of a successful strategy for eliminating child labour through sending children to school. Providing primary education to all has been a declared objective of the State since the framing of the Constitution, but the promise has been consistently belied. A variety of excuses have been put forward to explain Governmental inaction like inappropriateness of formal schools for certain social sections, unwillingness of parents to send children to school, inadequate schools and teachers, etc.

The practice of MVF is a powerful argument against the 'poverty argument' for the existence of child labour. The MVF has presented enough evidence to show that poor parents send their children to school where it is possible for them to do so and without being offered any financial inducements to do so. The income of parents is often as important an enabling factor in their sending children to school as other factors such as there being a school which is accessible, whether they themselves are literate, and their level of motivation. Hence MVF has stressed improvement of the quality of education and aiding access of parents and children to the school system both by helping them with unfamiliar tasks such as admission and

by inculcating a sense of participation among parents by getting them to contribute to the school fund. It is often not realized that illiterate parents are extremely unfamiliar with the process of admission and the preparation of various documents like birth and income certificates. It is far simpler for a parent in a village to take a child and place him or her in employment with some local landlord. MVF volunteers consistently stressed the point that the poverty argument presumed that parents were devoid of concern for the child's future or of any wish to improve their prospects. This was a patently false premise, belied by ground reality. Given an opportunity, parents have grasped it with open hands, even at the cost of considerable financial loss. Many activists recounted instances of parents who were opposed to their children giving up remunerative work for study, coming around when they saw other children gaining confidence and improving their prospects with education. Some parents sold their cattle to finance the education of their children. The relationship between parents and children has been restored to the normative one where the parents take care of children who play and study.

MVF has strong support for its policies from eminent political scientist, Myron Weiner. Weiner is critical of the argument that the level of individual income and a large population are the major obstacles in the achievement of universal primary education and abolition of child labour. In his view the problem is that there is little political support for compulsory education in India either from the government or from political parties.

Another misconception questioned by MVF is that formal education is inappropriate to the rural context. Some experts have even argued that rural, deprived children may be better off learning traditional skills within their community than going to schools whose curriculum is not adapted to their needs and work schedule. Formal schools merely push them into the ranks of the unemployed. MVF takes the opposite view that the formal school, with all its weaknesses, is the only institution designed for children and that all children should be in school and not at work. In fact, the very inflexibility of the school timetable precludes the possibility of a child combining work and study, a double burden. MVF volunteers point out that vocational education did not enhance the prospects of the child in a long term sense of the widening of choices; it reflected a class bias in that lower caste children were encouraged to join institutes for technical education on the assumption that this was appropriate to their position in society. The provision of training in the traditional occupations of the community similarly limited the options of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe children and augmented social stereotypes rather than breaking them down. The principle of equal opportunity was extremely important and it was for children to decide their future profession when they were mature and in a position to do so.

The MVF approach does not accept that child labour is an inevitable part of the rural landscape. It does not try to compensate the parents for withdrawing their children from labour and the resultant loss of income. MVF has demonstrated that even poor parents will send children to school if they can. Such is the success of MVF programme that whereas earlier parents had to be motivated and persuaded to send children to school today parents come to the camps and entrust their children to the volunteers, who will take on the responsibility for admitting them in government hostels later, even signing as their guardians!

III. Strategies of Mobilisation

The MVF perspective has two distinctive aspects, understanding of child labour and education and strategies of mobilization. The question before MVF activists was, if children must not work, where must they be? The answer was, in school. This is the conventional wisdom practiced in the West. It is ironical that in India children are barred from working in factories but not from fields in the village. In India it is not considered a norm that children must be in school, neither does it shock people when a child is out of school. In 1987 MVF conducted a survey of the factors that motivated children to go to school. The conclusion reached was the children came to school inspite of poverty and that non-economic factors, such as motivation of parents and good teaching, were important. As for non-formal schools, MVF volunteers found that children who had to both work and study bore a double burden. CRY gave funds for running non formal education centres but MVF discontinued the programme as the centres did not help the children to make the transition to formal schools.

Initially the focus was on bonded child labour, not all children. The issue itself was one that aroused antagonism both from employers, and attracted no support from parents. It was essential to create an awareness of the negative implications of bonded labour, otherwise one set of bonded labourers would merely be replaced by another. Children who were working at home also put pressure of MVF. demanding that they be given the opportunities provided to bonded labourers to withdraw from work and study. MVF thus realised that there cannot be one target group-bonded labour- and that they must widen the scope of their efforts to include all non-school going children. Once the definition of child labour was widened to includedall non-school going children, a social norm could be built around universal education. Upholding a universally valid principle make for an inclusive, all class, all caste approach.

A question that came up in the course of MVF's work was determining the relationship between NGOs and the state institutions. The approach of MVF was to facilitate access to existing institutions rather than set up parallel institutions. The state was seen as a welfare state, which could be make to respond to the poor if they were mobilized to demand their rights. The role of MVF was to provide a link between the target group and the state. The understanding was that the state was the instrument of the people and that the poor could create space in the polity for their struggle. This emerged from the conviction that the state belonged to all and that the hegemony of the ruling elites could be countered. This perspective helped MVF to steer clear of programmes like income generation, which fostered a self-help approach. Early on MVF volunteers found that children were coming to the camps from villages which had no MVF presence. This convinced them that there was no need to approach the villagers indirectly by taking up issues such as credit, land, irrigation, etc. The MVF adopted a direct approach in which the emphasis was on raising the consciousness of the people on the issue of child labour. MVF also avoided becoming typed as a middle class, altruistic, philanthropic NGO.

Marxism and Gandhism have both been major influences on MVF activists. The centrality of workers in the Marxist perspective influenced the initial choice of agricultural workers as a target group. The limits of violent struggle were soon realised. The method of confrontation in fighting for the rights of an exploited

group created bitterness in the village, as the exploiters were also a part of the village community. Confrontation also implied conspiratorial functioning. Meetings had to be held in the dead of night in the Harijan Basti. The path of confrontation also engendered violence and counter violence. Early on in the campaign against bonded labour, landlords resorted to brutal beating of the boy on whose behalf a petition for release had been submitted. The entire harijan basti was attacked, its inhabitants beaten and incapacitated and babies thrown out of their homes.

This was a crisis and a turning point. MVF brought in leaders of the Dalits to address a public meeting on the inequities of the social system. The tactic was one of pitting dalit power against upper caste power. However this only furthered violence, it did not reduce it. Caste consolidation politics were extremely limiting in the context of building awareness and bringing about social transformation in a long-term perspective. In any case, the danger of encouraging casteism was ever present in a situation where both the volunteers and the target group of bonded labour were from the scheduled caste community. However, it is to the credit of the volunteers that they studiously strove to avoid any confrontation or offend upper caste sensibilities in the course of their work. When Scheduled Caste youth carried out a survey of numbers of non-school going children, they exercised self-restraint and did not go inside upper caste houses. Similarly, in the course of mobilizing the village community against child labour and child marriage the volunteers were not offended when the upper caste villagers did not invite them into their houses. Their philosophy was that they did not mind as long as the landlords came around to the MVF point of view. In the early years MVF volunteers confined their efforts to mobilizing the scheduled castes and creating awareness among them. Today the MVF volunteers do not hesitate to work along with upper castes that support the programmes. Experience dictated the necessity of exploring the possibility of dialogue and reaching a settlement through negotiation and compromise, in the belief that anything gained was a step towards the ultimate ideal.

To an extent the issue of child labour lent itself to consensus building. Child rights were an issue on which there could be universal acceptance and a minimum common understanding could be evolved. This was not true of trade union struggles where the fight for economic betterment was often won at the expense of some other group. This aspect has allowed leaders of Dalits and CPI-ML groups to support MVF on this issue.

Strategies are discussed with great enthusiasm among activists and generally there is no one technique that is considered sacrosanct or superior to others. The strategies adopted today have evolved through the trial and error method. The question, which faced activists against bonded labour in the initial years, was, how could one bring down the level of tensions in the village? How could one convert the landlords from opponents to supporters? How did one convince the village community that they were wrong in perceiving bonded labour as legitimate? While thinking of ways to motivate employers and neutralise their opposition, the technique of felicitating them for releasing bonded labour was hit upon. The names of landlords performing vidyadaan were given in the newspapers and public accolades helped soften the blow of losing a valuable asset, the boy employees as a bonded labourer. The issue of the advance given to the parents of the bonded labourer was a tricky one as the landlords, being petty farmers themselves, had often borrowed to pay the parents. Hence they were not in a position to waive the advance. The parents, on the other hand,

were unwilling to let the boy leave employment, as they were not in a position to return the advance taken. In this situation the MVF volunteers got the boy to write a petition to the mandal revenue officer who warned the employers not to put any pressure on the parents or the boy. In other instances parents of the child who was sought to be released from bondage were helped with loans for purchasing land and cattle, sinking wells and buying pump sets. This improves the economic situation of the family and makes them more amenable to withdrawing labour from bondage.

One of the effective strategies is cooption of opponents of the programme. Yadaiah of Kowkuntla explained how they neutralized the powerful elements in the village during the programme to get 49 non-school going children to school. The task was formidable as the Reddys of the village included an ex home minister. The usual device of promising them enhancement of prestige with association with a good cause did not work. Then the simple offer of TA to the sarpanch for attending MVF meetings and making him an MVF resource person won him over and she worked hard to mobilise the parents of the 49 children who were out of school. Ramulu, organiser of Kothlapoor cluster, Marpally mandal, motivated two landlords, Kothla Malla Reddy and Ramesh, to publicly release their bonded labour at the meeting to be addressed by the visiting minister, Chandrasekhar, to get recognition and credit for their actions.

In the course of my field visit in Shankarpally mandal I was introduced to three reformed landlords of Kondakal village, Narasimha Reddy, Bhupal Reddy and Laxma Reddy, who have now become active supporters of MVF. There was a time when one of them had beaten up Janardhan, a senior activist of MVF. Bhupal Reddy now works in the nearby industrial estate, as he could no longer run his dairy business profitably without cheap bonded labour. Narsimha Reddy used to employ a Scheduled Tribe boy as a shepherd. However, MVF volunteers persuaded him, as president of the Parent Teacher Association, to set an example by releasing the boy in his employment. Interestingly, a landlord who released a child from bonded labour often became an active opponent of child labour if only because they did not want others to enjoy the benefit of bonded labour. The extent of changed attitudes among landlords is remarkable. The MVF too has moved from neutralising to winning over landlords.

This is evidently a self-consciously Gandhian experiment in social transformation. The founder of the programme, Shanta Sinha, was influenced by her exposure to Gandhian activists of the 1920s, 30s and 40s whom she interviewed for an oral history project on the national movement in 1984. MVF activists spoke of how they innovatively fashioned satyagraha as an instrument for social change. Many of the accounts were about affecting a change of heart among their opponents, be they landlords, capitalists, government officials or other figures of authority. Others emphasised the distinction they always drew between the system, which was to be opposed and those working the system, who were not to be treated as enemies but as potential fellow travellers.

Basic Principles of the functioning of the Organisation

The basic principles of the functioning of the organisation evolved as a logical extension of the issues taken up. When issues taken up are not confined to a single class or group, consensus building emerges as a

natural strategy. The issue of elimination of child labour through sending all children to school is by its very nature an inclusive one. There is no target group. No opponent, and the entire village is to be taken along in upholding what is seen as a universally valid principle. When the issue of releasing bonded labour was the primary focus, the tensions in the village ran high, the landlords often turned violent and even parents were opposed to the organisation. In fact, initially the violence was so much that it led to a lot of soul searching on the part of the MVF leadership. Not only was the bonded labourer beaten up, in one case an entire harijan basti was attacked in a brutal manner and several persons incapacitate. Volunteers learned not to respond to any provocation including physical beating so that they could continue to work in the village. Retaliation would have alienated them from the village community. The approach is not target centred, it is focused on the process. Taking everyone involved along through a series of confidence building measures is the first priority of the volunteers.

Negotiation and compromise were obviously the preferred tactics, and their effectively was realized and stressed by all. One activist pointed out that they took recourse to the law as a last resort and preferred to use it as a threat to persuade the employers of child labour to release the children. Often, the parents considered themselves obliged to return the advance given to them by the landlord and the MVF volunteers negotiated on their behalf to pay in instalments. Again, technically this was not required as child labour was illegal and in fact the landlords could be booked under the law, but since the children working as bonded labour, their parents and the landlords all belonged to the same village, a policy of negotiated settlement was desirable.

Non-violence seems to be an article of faith with the volunteers of MVF. Even volunteers who have been beaten up by hostile landlords and their henchmen for encouraging their bonded labourers to break free, bear no malice and continue to work in the village, with the conviction that their cause is just and their opponents will realize this in time. Vijaya, an activists in Marpally, explained that if we bow our heads before a hostile person and say, beat us if you wish to, the assaulter is often shamed and retreats. Bhikshapati of village Antaram explained that patience came naturally to an activist once he was convinced of the rightness and urgency of the cause. This gave an activist the strength to efface his own ego and do anything, including suffering violence without retaliating, in order to obtain their goal of social transformation.

Core Staff Meeting Chevella-March 18, 2000

Chevella, forty kilometers from Hyderabad down a beautiful tree lined road, houses a resource centre for organizers and teachers. The supervisors had gathered for a discussion of the principles of MVF. Each one headed a mandal. Below them were cluster organizers and village organizers. Most had started out as village level organizers. Each one represents 10,000 children. The group meets once a month to review work and plan for the next month.

The principles of MVF were discussed one by one. The first that came up for discussion was nonviolent conflict resolution. Instances were recounted of how activists who faced opposition got the villagers to see

their point of view by following a policy of nonviolence. In 1994 there was a lot of tension in Shankarpally as 65 children working as bonded labour had been released. MVF organized a function for National Child Labour Day and invited the minister to attend. The landlords employing bonded labour threatened to burn the dias but once the minister came and supported the programme their attitude changed and they accepted the release of their labourers. The range of strategies varies from motivation of social boycott. Yadaiah, deputy sarpanch, mandal Kowkuntla, told the batch of newly recruited MDOs that landlords who employed bonded labour and parents who refused to send their children to school were refused all benefits including access to the public distribution system. He described the result of the efforts of MVF volunteers as a revolution in the village.

Another principle of MVF's functioning was working in collaboration with the government and existing institutions rather than replicating them. The effort is to widen the scope of the institutions, be it the school, the gram panchayat, the mahila sangham or the school education committees. MVF recognises that a successful strategy is one that can be replicated. It should be adopted by government institutions and NGOs and become accepted as universal practice. Given the negative attitude of teachers in government schools to children who were earlier bonded labour, MVF did toy with the possibility of having separate schools for bonded labour. However, the understanding developed that education was the responsibility of the state and empowerment of the community in the case of marginalized groups included making them aware of their rights to demand and access services provided by the state. An MVF volunteer explained that otherwise they would have become a managerial body rather than an organization, which seeks to raise consciousness. Another volunteer conjectured, that even if there was no MVF in future, the existing institutions will continue. For example, the school was earlier responsible for the children enrolled; now the school is responsible for all the children in the village. It is the responsibility of the teacher to persuade the children to come to the school.

Some instances will indicate the close partnership between MVF and the officials. The mandal resource officer of the Shankerpally mandal spent one entire Sunday at the Shankerpally office when I was there. A child marriage 'case' had come up and he was there along with the MVF activists trying to persuade the parents to call off the marriage. Both the MRO at Shankarpally and the MDO at Marpally said they worked in close collaboration with MVF as it was doing good work in the areas which came under their jurisdiction and which were part of their official brief.

The janmabhoomi movement, started by Chandrababu Naidu, the Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, was also made use of, Bhikshapati Reddy of village Antaram, Chevella mandal, gave a petition to the revenue officer to free two children from bonded labour at a public meeting. The officials had no choice but to release the children, as it was a public meeting. In another mandal the Sub-Inspector of police was approached to help them oppose child labour and child marriages. He agreed to join the activists in opposing child marriages at the time of the local New Year Day when the annual contracts for bonded labour are signed and marriages are celebrated. In Chevella mandal a committee comprising the MRO, MDO and the Sub-Inspector of Police along with the youth group and elected representatives was formed. This committee was able to get a large number of bonded child labourers released. There are instances

where the police have intervened to prevent a child marriage, but on the whole the police is inactive as it is influenced by local political leaders, who, in turn, merely reflect the prevailing social attitudes, instead of being agents of social change.

On the whole, Ranga Reddy district officials have been sensitized to the issue of child labour as the community has been a watchdog.

Women activists are few and have had to face opposition from their familiars, especially their mothers-in-law. But they have stuck on despite odds. Vijaya, now in Marpally, married a fellow activist and now has a two-year child who is almost an MVF volunteer himself. If someone is very aggressive, or he feels his mother is under threat, he ticks off that person with an effective, 'eh, eh'. Vijayalakshmi, a teacher at Aloor girls' camp, said they were criticised by the villagers from staying out at night and 'roaming' with boys. Women activists were often accused by villagers of being of low character and 'spoiling' the village. They ignored the abuses and carried on their work. Parents of child labourers abusively castigated the volunteers for getting salaries by depriving them of their livelihood!

Education as an Instrument of Social Change

Education has been fashioned as a weapon in the hands of the weaker sections of society, empowering them by enabling access to opportunities offered by society. Labourers condemned to bondage regain control over their own lives by becoming educated and improving their confidence and prospects. Here again, unlike NGOs which are service providers either as deliverers of alternative education or as devisers of pedagogic inputs into the educational curricula, MVF has worked to strengthen the existing school system, which, it believes, can work as an instrument of social change. Schools are seen as the best answer to the problem of child labour, because if a child is at school he cannot be at work. However, since universal education remains a chimera, MVF concentrates its efforts on enrolling the children in school and ensuring that they remain there. A variety of strategies are adopted to this end. Volunteers mobilize the community to ensure regularity of the teachers, sometimes taking representations to the mandal education officer, at other times appointing para teachers paid by the village and MVF to make teaching more effective. The para teacher scheme of the MVF is cost effective, the teacher being paid a fraction of what a government teacher is paid and moreover accountable to every villager. The Andhra Pradesh government has adopted it and 55,000 para teachers were being appointed to make good the shortfall in teachers. Unfortunately most MVF education volunteers have not been appointed to these positions, as the community was not entrusted with their selection and government officials indifferent to the track record of the candidates made the selections.

A sense of community participation in and even ownership of schools has emerged from the practice of every villager contributing towards the payment for para teachers or construction of the school building or purchase of equipment. The amount may be small, even Rs.5 per family but, as a poor woman explained, this gave her the right to ask why the teacher had not come to the school. Any group could finance the teacher, be it the youth club, the gram panchayat or even through a cess on toddy dealers or contractors

transporting limestone from the area. If the village community supported two teachers, MVF would pay for another two. Marginalized communities, denied access to services provided by the government, are empowered by enabling them to gain access. In many instances the village community raised money to refurbish or even construct a school building where there was none and the formation of School Education Committees, earlier known as parent teacher organizations, has made the community a participant in the education system. The School Education committees have proved to be most innovative in raising funds for schools. Ragi Reddy, SEC Chairman, village Kothlapoor, demanded that the toddy toppers and toddy vendors pay Rs.1000 each towards the cost of construction of the school. When they resisted, the villagers looted their lorries and broke the bottles. The license holders threatened to institute police cases against the villagers but eventually gave in. The school building was constructed on land given cheap by the SEC Chairman and both the village and MVF sponsored teachers.

The village teacher was initially opposed to the programme of enrolment of children in school as this only meant increasing his burden in an overcrowded school. MVF took up their problems by providing a teacher volunteer and putting pressure on the government to provide more teachers. At one point the situation was so bad that even a later from the Collector recommending admission was ignored and children were dissuaded from coming to school in any number of ways. The result is that the typical lackadaisical village teacher, now no longer overburdened and facing a village community which demanded good education in return for their investment, is now an interested teacher who tries to enroll children in the school and becomes on occasions even an activist against child labour and child marriage. These teachers are members of an organization, Bala Karmika Vimochana Vedika, BKVV, formed in 1996, which creates awareness on the issue of child labour. There are 1300 members spread over 19 mandals with a core group of 80 government teachers. It has developed as a lobby for protection of child rights.

The device of the bridge camp is designed to prepare the child released from bonded labour for school by taking him to the educational level appropriate to his or her age. Otherwise, children sent directly to the school tended to drop out, as they were much older than the other children in the first class. The bridge camp serves to provide a necessary break from the village and family where there is tension in the village consequent on release of bonded labour. In the beginning camps were set up to keep boys released from bonded labour away from the tensions in the village. The rationale of the camps was not education but gradually the link between the two emerged. Girl children often need to be put in a bridge course for a long duration as they and their families have not been oriented towards education, only towards work. So isolation from work environment and a longer period of reorientation is provided. Younger children stay in the camp for three to six months after which they are enrolled in Class I to Class V. Children in the age group 12-14 are coached over a twelve to eighteen month period to prepare them for the seventh class examination, after which they can directly be admitted to senior school and a residential hostel.

Visit to Aloor Girls Camp, Chevella mandal. The girls, over 280 at present, have a lot of fun splashing colour on each other. It's Holi and the celebrations started last night itself with girls in the dormitories painting moustaches on the faces of other girls. The hordes is filled with water and the teacher volunteers give them colour. Screaming and shouting goes on in all parts of the camp as buckets of water land on an

unsuspecting girls or a teacher hiding in a remote shed is discovered and plastered with colour. My self appointed companion is Sandhya Rani, who had worked as a domestic help for a Marwari family for many years before joining the camp. She takes over from the time I set foot in the camp, translating from Telugu to Hindi, pulling the sheet over my feet at night, holding my soap case, pouring water for me to wash, up in the morning, even guarding the room I had buried myself into to escape from Holi revellers. Sadly, it is because she is so used to working that she performs the task of helping me so efficiently. Every little while, as I struggled to theorise about MVF strategy, she would burst into quaint English sentences memorized by rote like, ‘Who started the modern Olympic games’ Burundi Kabaddi (well that’s what is sounded like) or “why do dolphins come out of water?” or “What do crocodiles do at night?” or sing, “Johnny, Johnny yes papa”. It seems so incongruous, this English language and more so the English context in the use of words like dolphins and Johnny that the sounds reverberate in that hot Telengana atmosphere for long, unable to fade away somewhere unnoticed. Yet for the girl being able to speak English is a great achievement, she is so thrilled that she can find her name in my notes and point out with great pride, “There, Maydam, Sandhya Rani”, a name she has given herself in the camp, as if to shed forever the imprisoning old self and with it, if possible, the scarred skin on her waist where her employer branded her with a hot iron when she dropped a thermos flask.

The summer camp and bridge course is the cornerstone of the MVF programme. MVF is extremely enterprising in mobilizing government and community resources to house these camps. The camps are often located in disused government buildings. The MVF volunteers locate a building not in use and seek permission to use it for their camp on a temporary basis. The Aloor girls’ camp is located in abandoned poultry sheds allotted to the scheduled caste community under a government scheme for economic improvement of weaker sections. The Sivareddypet camp is on the site of the office of the Vikarabad industrial estate. Disused Food Corporation of India Godowns, buildings of a college, which has found new premises, nothing escapes the eyes of MVF volunteers, trained to generate resources from nothing.

Girl Child Programme and Campaign Against Child Marriage

Child marriage is a more complex issue than child labour as it is a question of change of cultural practices. It is easier to oppose landlords than parents who see their children as their personal affair in which they want no interference. Earlier the practice was for volunteers to try and stop a marriage if the girl came to them for help. Here again, persuasion of parents was preferred to lodging a complaint with the police. Of late, youth committees survey the area for prospective marriages and make a list, which they submit to the Mandal Development Officer for action. Very often, a notice that the marriage would invite action would suffice. Girls’ Child committees and mothers’ committees were convened to create awareness on the issue. Girls’ committees act as a watchdog in the schools to report on cases of impending marriages. Members of the mothers’ committees would motivate mothers of prospective child brides to stop the marriage, as it was not in the interest of the health of the girl. Mothers’ committees were distinct from DWCRAs committees, which were also used to spread awareness on this issue. Nineteen marriages were annulled under the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1998-1999 on the basis of complaints filed by MVF and acted upon by the

police. This figure does not include marriages which are postponed because of pressure by MVF and the community.

I was witness to two visits by parents who came to the MVF office to seek 'permission' to marry their daughters who were below the legal marriageable age. One was at the Shankarpally-field office and the other at the cluster meeting at village Syed Malkapur, Parigi mandal. The plea, as always, was that the grandmother wanted to see the girl married before her eyes or that the utensils and clothes had been bought or that the girl would never get another groom if her marriage were cancelled as the assumption would be that there was something wrong with her.

MVF volunteers are sometimes not successful in preventing child marriages. The parents adopt all sorts of stratagems, like conducting the marriage in another village, hiding the girl in an unknown place till the dust settles and then quietly marrying her off, etc. In village Kalapur in Parigi mandal the marriages of three minor girls were fixed. When members of the girls' committee visited their homes the parents dressed up the girls in saris to convince the visitors that they were adults. When the Child Rights Protection Committee forwarded the complaint of the girls to the police and later approached the Collector, the parents won over the police, which presented three adults before the Collector as the girls to be married, to give a bad name to MVF. The MVF office had to be closed for two days, as there was a lot of resentment in the air.

The last two years have seen an intensification of the girls child programme. In 1998-1999, the number of girls out of school in Ranga Reddy district reduced by 1761. A number of groups including teachers, youth, parents, SEC members, DWCRA groups, sarpanches and local officials joined together to motivate girls and their parents to enroll in schools.

Indicators of Success of MVF

The work of MVF has expanded by leaps and bounds. Where MVF volunteers spent three years to reach the gram panchayats in Shankarpally, the gram panchayats from Chevella approached MVF, inviting its volunteers to come to their mandal. So they could be at the state they had already reached. The awareness of the community on the crucial issues of child labour, education and child marriage has grown so much in certain mandals that today major gains result from little effort. During my meeting with activists of Parigi mandal the volunteers lamented that they had no dramatic cases to report as the community in Parigi was extremely aware and organised and parents and employers saw the wisdom of going along with rather than opposing the community.

It is often said that the success of an organisation lies in its no longer being needed. MVF seems to be proving this by withdrawing where it can and handing over control to other groups. In January 1999 MVF took an important step towards establishing the community's ownership of the child labour programme by handing over charge of its child labour programme to non-MVF groups in 78 villages of Ranga Reddy district. These groups are youth committees, School Education Committees, BKVV, Education Volunteers, Sarpanch, Headmaster and DWCRA groups. The experiment had been found successful on a small scale

earlier. For example, Jaidupally village in Dharur mandal became child labour free and boasted full enrolment of children in schools due to the efforts of the youth volunteers and BKVV to whom MVF had handed over charge. SECs and gram panchayats have been given 'seed money' for the school and peer evaluation of SECs has improved their functioning. I attended a meeting held at the MVF mandal office in Tandur, of the SEC chairman, youth activists, sarpanches and MVF volunteers to evaluate the use to which seed money had been put in selected villages in three mandals. Some of the villages covered were Veersetpally, where there was no school teacher in 1996 and the village community made strenuous efforts to strengthen the school; Bhojanaya thanda, a tribal hamlet in Basheerabad mandal; Nawangi in Basheerabad mandal; Rudravam, Peddemul mandal, where a child's death from pesticide poisoning occasioned the visit of Justice Ramaswamy, the chairman of the National Commission of Human Rights and Swami Agnivesh; Parvatpally, Basheerabad mandal; Gingurthy, Tandur mandal. Child Rights Protection Committee's were formed in villages and at the mandal level to act as local counseling and motivation centres. This is part of the effort of creating local level support structures to take on the tasks earlier carried out by MVF volunteers so that the village community is empowered.

It is a measure of the success of MVF that the MVF model of bridge courses was adopted by the Department of Social Welfare in the 'Back to School' programme in the entire state of Andhra Pradesh. 3,00,000 Children have been reached through this scheme. The Social Welfare Department officials were trained by MVF to implement the programme. The Department of Women and Child Welfare conducted special residential bridge course camps for adolescent girls who had been released from work in each district. All non-formal education centres have been integrated into the formal school system. DPEP has taken up the programme of elimination of child labour through education on a pilot basis in 15 districts. Summer camps for older children who have stagnated in Class I and II were organized by the government of Andhra Pradesh. The education department has instructed all headmasters to admit students at any time during the year in response to pressure from parents.

Prospects

One of the leaders of MVF, in the course of a discussion on the vision of MVF, wonders whether it is a movement or a programme. The closest the work of the MVF comes to is constructive programme initiated by Gandhiji in the 1930s, which, centering on issues like popularization of Khadi, harijan welfare, village uplift, raised popular awareness and prepared cadres and volunteers for the next mass movement. MVF's work is a programme of social change, which, by virtue of its mass support, brings about transformation more enduring, more deep rooted than wrought by a movement of a 'revolutionary' kind. The process adopted here is slow, incremental, working through example, through demonstration effect, through endless persuasion. This is in contrast to the mobilisational momentum of a movement, which quickly rises but all too quickly declines, limiting the movement to a concrete historical period, for example, the Naxal years.

MVF leaders believe that their work can assume the proportions of a movement only by replication and expansion at the state level. The state government ignores them as they are limited to a district and that too one headed by a Congress MLA, a scion of the influential family of the late M. Chenna Reddy, Ex-Chief

Minister. Hence MVF is now spreading the message to other districts and helping interested local persons organize against child labour and child marriage. MVF's stance is in sharp contrast to most NGOs, which are terrified of largeness and prefer to be small and localized and under personalized leadership. There is networking with other NGOs too. Groups of volunteers visited centres under the Lok Jumbish project in Rajasthan, Sutra in Solan district of Himachal Pradesh and Birbhum district of West Bengal.

MVF suffers the same fate as most successful individuals or organizations, that is, it has received accolades, generous financial disbursements and international awards yet the revolutionary aspect of its work in the field of child labour and education has not been adequately appreciated. The MVF model has not become part of developmental practice. Few outside Andhra Pradesh and 'development' circles know of the tidal wave of social change that is sweeping the dusty villages adjoining the much vaunted and publicized cyber city, Hyderabad, on which even the US President bestowed his presence. What is important about the MVF programme is its perspective with its focus on changing the attitudes of the community, rather than the strategies or policies adopted by MVF, which are ever evolving in response to the changing needs of specific situations. Education has been transformed from a low profile and much ignored system to a powerful agency for social change and provision of equal opportunity for disadvantaged social groups. A discerning observer has commented that MVF has adopted the provision of education as "the site of resistance for egalitarian change." The story of MVF needs to be told and retold so that it becomes part of our folklore, as an epic story of how an organisation, with the minimum of resources but the greatest possible capacity to garner the scarce resources of a community and make them self-regenerating, can trigger off a process of empowerment of the most deprived social groups, who had surrendered even the wherewithal for resistance.

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