

UNIVERSALIZING CHILD RIGHTS

**A Review of M. V. Foundation's Achievements and
Future Directions**

by

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May 2010

Conducted for

M.V. Foundation

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***UNIVERSALIZING CHILD RIGHTS:
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CONTENTS

	Page
<i>Foreward</i>	5
1. Purpose of the Review	7
2. The Context	9
3. M.V. Foundation: The Core Model	11
3.1 The Poverty Argument	12
3.2 The Non-Negotiables	13
3.3 Main Strategies	14
3.4 Principle of Inclusion	15
3.5 Role of the State	16
3.6 Quality of Education: An Ongoing Issue	
4. The Second Phase: Widening and Deepening	18
4.1 Attention to the Early Years: Age 0-5	19
4.2 In-School Issues: Age 6-14	24
4.3 Beyond High School: Age 15-18	25
5. The Second Phase: From Mobilization to Institutionalization	27
5.1 Institutionalization through CRPFs	27
5.2 Strengthening Gram Panchayats to Protect Child Rights	29
5.3 Girl Youth Groups	32
6. Dissemination of the Model	35
6.1 MVF Resource Persons: An Innovative Approach to Dissemination	36
6.2 Replicating the MVF Approach in Madhya Pradesh: Partnership with a State Agency	38
6.3 International Advocacy: ‘Stop Child Labour: School is the Best Place to Work Campaign’	41
7. Reflections from the Field	42
7.1 Impact on Children	42
7.2 Impact on Families	45

7.3	Creating Child Friendly Communities	49
7.4	Enabling Child Participation	53
7.5	Impact on Government and Panchayati Raj Bodies	54
7.6	Gendering Universality	57
7.7	Tracking the Journey: MVF's Impressive Data Collection Systems	61
7.8	MVF Resource Persons: A Moving Force	64
7.9	Institutionalization and Sustainability: How Secure is it?	65
8.	Recommendations	69
9.	A Final Reflection	75

FOREWORD

It is now exactly 20 years since the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation (MVF) released 30 children from bonded labour in Ranga Reddy district in Andhra Pradesh. From these small beginnings in 1991, MVF has grown into a complex and successful organization that has developed its own unique approach to dealing with the related issues of child labour and education. What the MVF has in fact triggered off is a mass movement for change that has grown in depth and scope as it has mobilized local communities and taken on a broader range of related issues. MVF is now at a critical juncture and is poised to take the next leap in its organizational development. We are grateful to Venkat Reddy for inviting us to share in this exercise of institutional introspection. It has been a learning curve for us and we hope that we have been able to contribute in some small measure to the internal organizational debate on these issues.

We would like to thank MVF staff and volunteers in Ranga Reddy and Nalgonda districts for organizing our field programme, accompanying us on field visits and meetings and for sharing their experiences and hopes for the future with us. The documentation centre provided us with all the statistical information and other documentation that we requested. A special word of thanks is due to them as also to Arvind Kumar Apsingikar and Bhaskar for facilitating the visits and acting as our interpreters.

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1

PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW

The team was commissioned by MVF to conduct an impact assessment of the programme funded by the EU Consortium led by HIVOS, focusing in particular on the grant period 2006-2009. This report is, therefore, not intended to be an evaluation, rather an internal review with the main objective of assisting MVF to reflect critically on its activities during this period, elicit lessons learnt and suggest ways forward for the next phase of its work.


Terms of Reference

The following terms of reference were provided:

- a. Scrutinize the consistency between the aims and objectives of MVF and the means employed to reach them;
- b. Highlight the impact of MVF's work on government and Panchayati Raj bodies;
- c. Assess the extent of institutionalization of MVF activities;
- d. Assess the success of its dissemination activities in Madhya Pradesh and other states;
- e. Analyze the impact of MVF's programmes on children, families and communities.

Methodology

The review is based on field visits to Ranga Reddy and Nalgonda districts from 24th-30th December, 2009. Meetings were held with staff, volunteers and resource persons working with MVF and with children, youth, parents, community representatives, teachers, and members of Gram Panchayats, Child Rights Protection Forums (CRPF), Girl Youth Groups and alumni groups in the areas where MVF is active. Wherever appropriate and



possible, a special effort has been made to convey perceptions and arguments directly using the words and voices of those interviewed. The team also consulted internal MVF documents and publications, including previous evaluations, annual reports and statistical data. In conducting this review, the members of the team also drew on their previous interactions and long standing exposure to MVF's work in Andhra Pradesh and its dissemination efforts in Madhya Pradesh.

The evidence and reflections presented in this review allow for a systematic assessment of the EU funded component of MVF's activities during 2006-2009. However, given the dynamic and organically interlinked nature of the programme, the paper goes beyond these narrow specifics and provides an insight into a broader range of activities, some of them falling outside the purview of the EU project.

Structure of the Review

The narrative begins with a short introduction (Section 2), which provides the contextual environment in which MVF operates. This is followed in section 3 by a condensed review of the key elements of MVF's core model, highlighting the guiding philosophy and operational strategies for eradicating child labour, universalizing education and creating child-labour free villages. As it took root and matured, this core model unfolded into a more holistic strategy for addressing child rights more fully, incorporating fresh objectives and new interventions, and involving a systematic process aimed at developing sustainable institutional structures that would carry the movement forward, described in Sections 4 and 5. Section 6 describes the processes by which the model is being disseminated to other regions. Against this backdrop, the review reports in Section 7 on findings from the field, concentrating on a shortlist of significant dimensions. This sets the basis for the formulation of a forward-looking set of recommendations in Section 8. A final reflection in Section 9 summarizes in a nutshell the remarkable cost-effectiveness of MVF as a catalyst of social transformation in the field of child labour and education.




2

THE CONTEXT

In 2001, one quarter of Indian men and one half of Indian women over the age of 15 were illiterate. Enrolments for primary education suggest that universality is within reach, but this is a mirage: secondary enrolment rates fall away drastically, especially for girls; and completion rates both for primary as well as secondary schooling seriously dent any optimism created by the simplistic enrolment data. School education in India is in crisis – this, sixty years after the adoption of the Indian Constitution which charged the government to deliver free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of fourteen.

Clearly, the directive principles of the constitution could not provide sufficient momentum to the government. Now, to hold governmental responsibilities up to the sticking point, there is a binding constitutional right to education. Alongside this, it can be argued that the decade of rapid growth has negated any notion of resource scarcity – indeed, recently, there was a 2% special education cess added on to the income tax base rate. And there is a national programme for the universalisation of elementary education, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Yet, even the collective force of these seemingly powerful enabling interventions cannot dispel the perception of a deep-seated malaise, if not a crisis, in school education in India. There seems to be a wide chasm between professed intentions, the constitutional right and the healthy fiscal coffers on the one side, and their outcomes in terms of concrete achievements on the other. This gap would only be wider if the focus was on the countryside, and if the yardstick rightly measured the quality outcomes of the educational process instead of simply focusing on the quantitative throughputs in terms of enrolments.



The gap arises from many known and seemingly intractable factors and ground realities. Universalisation cannot be successful if it does not contend with social exclusion. The goal of getting all children into school cannot be achieved if many of them are obliged to work as child labourers, often in bondage; nor can all girls be at school if gender biases persist. Neither will children stay on in school if the quality of schooling is poor, or if school facilities are less than meagre, or if teachers do not come regularly to the classroom, and, if and when they do, they do not, or are not trained or motivated to teach effectively. Nor can children learn if their capabilities have already been undermined by malnutrition in their early years, or if they do not have resources at home, or prospects for the future beyond schooling. It is clear that the announcement of an act of parliament plus the allocation of funds do not automatically convert into a vibrant and effective educational process; more money plus more bureaucracy definitely do not guarantee success; that realization seems increasingly to have become the consensus. The problem of converting these inputs into outcomes lies in the difficult intermediate terrain, the no-man's land, characterized by institutional, organizational, behavioural, and societal value-system failures. It is this most challenged and challenging environment that MVF has chosen for its field of operations, as its battleground in its struggles for fulfilling the right to education of all children.

Has MVF walked its brave talk? How far has it got? How much ground has it gained? How significant has been its impact? What is the wider relevance and significance of its distinctive approach? What are its present coordinates, constraints and challenges? Are there lessons and pointers to the way ahead, not just in its own locale but also in terms of national up-scaling? This review provides an evidence-based reflection on these questions; some of these find unambiguous answers, others lead to qualified conclusions, and yet others generate fresh questions for exploration.




3

M.V. FOUNDATION - THE CORE MODEL

MVF is widely recognized for its innovative and successful approach to dealing with the difficult issues of child labour and education. Established in 1991 in Ranga Reddy district, in Andhra Pradesh, the programme has by now successfully withdrawn 600,000 children from work and mainstreamed them into full-time, formal, government schools and 1500 villages are now free from child labour. The health and education status of children is being monitored on a regular basis in 1500 Gram Panchayats. This has been achieved with the help of 30,000 Education Activists and 80,000 youth volunteers and members of Child Rights Protection Forums (CRPFs) who have been mobilized to release children from labour and enrol them into the educational stream. In addition, they have succeeded in retaining 25,000 adolescent girls – a notoriously hard to reach group – in school and have stopped 8000 child marriages in this period. MVF has successfully challenged and overcome problems in a highly visible and dramatic fashion, contributing to a transformation of the coverage and quality of mainstream education programmes in the districts where it is active.

MVF has avoided being boxed into the confines of a project format with its inevitable and circumscribed boundaries. Instead, it has pioneered a grassroots movement that has evolved organically through the mobilization of local stakeholders who have come to share a common philosophical approach to child labour and education. The last few years have seen a broadening and deepening of the movement. From the initial focus on child labour and education for the 5-14 age group, MVF has now taken on a broader array of child rights issues related to a wider age group (see Section 4 below).



Some key aspects of MVF's philosophy and operational principles that deserve mention are highlighted below.¹

3.1 The Poverty Argument

Perhaps the most unique aspect of MVF's approach is that it challenges mainstream views on the issues of child labour, education and poverty. Policy makers, bureaucrats, the public at large and even some NGOs, while decrying the existence of child labour, still accept it as an inevitable fact on account of the poverty of the parents. These rationalisations have been readily internalized, including by the poor, and are accepted as received wisdom. MVF provides a challenging and refreshing counter-viewpoint to these prevailing views. The organisation recognises poverty as a relevant factor in child labour but it holds that the main causation is rooted in social and cultural factors that condone 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. This means turning around deep-seated value systems and changing mindsets – of the poor, as also of society at large.

It is a widely accepted fact that there is a latent demand for education among poor parents but they opt for child labour because this is accepted by local culture and tradition and because they do not see school as a viable option. However, given a supportive institutional environment, poor parents can and do make adjustments to send their children to school and are willing to make sacrifices to make this possible. Taking the view that universal education need not wait for prior universal poverty alleviation, MVF works to provide an enabling framework within which the


¹ For a detailed account of MVF's mandate, approach and strategies see MVF Annual Reports; Rekha Wazir (2002), "Getting Children Out of Work and Into School: MV Foundation", MV Foundation: Secunderabad; Rekha Wazir (2002), "No to Child Labour Yes to Education: Unfolding of a Grass Roots Movement in Andhra Pradesh", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 52; Sucheta Mahajan, "Education for Social Change: MVF and Child Labour", Delhi: National Book Trust.

poor can assert themselves over their lives and bring about permanent change for their children. Most often, child labour merely provides the mirage of alleviating poverty in the short run. All it achieves, though, is trading one form of deprivation for another, since a lack of education (to which the child labourer is condemned) is in itself a fundamental dimension of poverty in the first place. At the same time, educational deprivation is virtually guaranteed to erode the child's capacity for long-term advancement. The MVF approach seeks ways in which the move from child labour to schooling can be absorbed by the family with minimal negative impact through encouraging and enabling the members of the household to adapt creatively to the new short-term reality. Through achieving this, the child's long-term livelihood trajectory and economic prospects are given a significant boost.

3.2 The Non-Negotiables

An important factor in MVF's strategy is its uncompromising stand that all children should be in school and no child must be at work. No distinction is made between hazardous and non-hazardous labour, or between child labour and child work. The extension of the definition of child labour to include all out of school children has been made after considerable reflection. The reality on the ground has demonstrated that children who do not go to school are put to work on the family farm or on domestic tasks, frequently on a full-time basis. These children also constitute a reserve pool of labour waiting to be absorbed in the wage labour market as and when the opportunity becomes available. Both the ethics as well as the necessity of child labour - a strategy that undermines the child's future life chances - are questioned. Taking the Rights of the Child as its starting point, MVF therefore targets *all* out of school children in its programme and aims to bring them *all* into formal school. Helping with domestic chores and other tasks is not frowned upon, so long as it does not interfere with full participation in the formal educational process.

The philosophy underlying MVF's work has crystallised into the following Charter of Basic Principles for Emancipation of Child Labour – also known as the 'Non-Negotiables' - that summarise



the organisation's stand on the issue of child labour and guide its work in the field:

- ❖ All children must attend formal full-time day schools.
- ❖ Any child out of school is considered a child labourer.
- ❖ All work/ labour is hazardous and harms the overall growth and development of the child.
- ❖ There must be total abolition of child labour.
- ❖ Any justification perpetuating the existence of child labour must be condemned.

These principles may sound rigid at first glance, but it is their very 'non-negotiability' that gives a clear focus and direction to MVF's unique strategy for eliminating child labour. However, the 'non-negotiability' applies only to the objectives of the organisation – that all children should be in school and no child should be at work. The strategies for achieving these objectives are far from dogmatic or rigid. They respond flexibly to needs as they arise and are geared to be locally relevant and acceptable.

3.3 Main Strategies

MVF has developed a set of inter-linked strategies to achieve its objectives of enrolling children of school going age, allowing those who have missed the boat to catch up and then retaining them in school. 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 the entire community and all stakeholders such as teachers, employers of children, youth groups, women's groups, elected local representatives and district and state government officials. Since MVF does not believe in setting up parallel systems, it works towards strengthening the existing government schools. At the core of MVF'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. For the first time these children are given a space of their own with no demands on their time and ample opportunity to learn and play. At the end of this process the


children are ready to access the school system in a meaningful and sustainable manner. 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.

Once children are ready to enrol in school, the more difficult business of keeping them there begins. MVF has devised a set of strategies that engage the school-going child from all possible angles, providing the much-needed support to prevent them from dropping out. 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 mobilisation efforts. Another key feature of MVF's strategy is to involve the community in the ownership and management of the programme. They are encouraged to collectively define the needs of the school and to make sure that children don't drop out. 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.

3.4 Principle of Inclusion through Universality

Much of the success of MVF in achieving this is a consequence of its philosophy of inclusion. All social groups, classes, castes, communities and individuals are involved in its programmes. A fair share of the population of rural Andhra Pradesh belongs to Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe or minority religious groups and class lines are sharply drawn on account of the significant numbers of landless agricultural labourers. MVF has learnt from experience that focusing exclusively on one group would shift the agenda from the issue of child rights to issues of identity, caste or class rights. In order to avoid this, all children are included in the programme and not just bonded labour, or scheduled caste or girl children. This has the advantage of having a wider appeal and of bringing the entire community – parents, teachers, employers of child labour, government officials and above all the children themselves – together around the issue of children's rights. 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.

While taking an inclusive approach, MVF recognizes that there is a need to develop specific actions and strategies for difficult-to-reach groups. For example, special efforts are made to get older children out of labour and into schools. Similarly, it is recognized that there are certain distinct issues involved in enrolling and retaining girls in school. These issues are analyzed and discussed by the entire community and appropriate solutions are developed. This ensures that problem groups are not compartmentalized; instead it becomes the responsibility of the entire community to find viable, long-lasting and locally relevant solutions.

3.5 Role of the State

MVF is emphatic in its view that it should not set up institutions that are parallel to those set up by the state. Instead, existing public institutions such as schools, social welfare hostels, and Gram Panchayats are strengthened and made partners in the fight against child labour. It is in the process of accessing, interacting with and even challenging these institutions that the community realizes its strengths and gets empowered. It begins to correct the system, demand its share in state establishments and bring about improvements in the existing system. MVF realizes that it cannot replicate the existing educational infrastructure on the scale that would be required to achieve universal education. If the aim is to bring about changes that are sustainable and on a large scale, there is no alternative to using government institutions. Thus, no attempt is made to replicate or replace the educational institutions of the state. Instead, great effort is put into enhancing the capacity of government schools, improving the quality of education, and making the educational process responsive to people's needs and demands.

MVF has been successful in conveying its message and demands to the education bureaucracy and to politicians, resulting in tangible changes in government policies and programmes. These changes are visible both at the local level, where the education

bureaucracy interfaces with the working child and its family, and at the level of statewide policies. For example, the Andhra Pradesh government has accepted the MVF innovation of residential bridge courses as an effective strategy for preparing dropouts, and out of school and working children for the class appropriate to their age. The Back to School Programme – a large-scale government initiative covering the entire state - draws heavily on the residential camp model. MVF has provided training to schoolteachers and to the State Council for Educational Research and Training and the state bureau of the District Primary Education Programme for this purpose. More recently, MVF's efforts at improving the quality of education in government schools have also been taken over by the Sarva Shiksha Abiyan programme in Andhra Pradesh.





4

THE SECOND: PHASE WIDENING AND DEEPENING

The MVF movement to universalize education and eliminate child labour has grown and developed dramatically since its inception in 1991. The contours of the movement have been defined and redefined in response to new issues and tasks as they have presented themselves. MVF has moved away from a village-focused approach towards a wider intervention aimed at creating child labour free zones that take the district or mandal as their unit. This allows the organization to take a holistic view of child rights and provide a counter to sectoral approaches that focus exclusively on gender, on caste or on ethnicity.

This holistic approach has inevitably involved a major shift in the activities now undertaken by MVF. The target group has expanded - from children of school going age to *all* children in the 0-18 age group and the focus has shifted from monitoring child labour/ education to monitoring *all* rights of children in the 0 - 18 age group. Simultaneously, MVF has taken some innovative steps to ensure the sustainability and continuation of the programme by transferring responsibility for monitoring child rights to local institutions such as Gram Panchayats, Child Rights Protection Forums (CRPFs) and youth groups. With this organic spillover, the MVF movement could be seen as entering its second phase where it is confronting a host of wider behavioural, infrastructural, institutional and political constraints. It is not possible to put a clear time-line on the move from the first to the second phase, nor is it possible to demarcate strategies as belonging to one phase or the other. This has happened as a gradual process and new issues often dovetail with and are overlaid on the old. This organic growth is a product of the success of MVF - as they have extended

themselves and incorporated fresh tasks they have encountered and responded to new types of constraints that emerge in the unfolding of the process.

Obviously, the movement is at different stages in the different project areas where MVF is active. Ranga Reddy district is the most advanced and the widespread rejection of child labour and an acceptance of the norm that all children should be in school is palpable. It was obvious from our field investigations in this district that these issues are now taken for granted, as ground already claimed, and concern has shifted to related issues such as improving the quality of school education and school infrastructure, preventing child marriage, assuring care in the early years and facilitating access to high schools so that children can continue their education beyond the village school. Community mobilization efforts now take a broader view of child rights that go beyond child labour and education to include the dimensions of health, nutrition, participation, birth registration, child marriage and corporal punishment. Considerable effort is being put into strengthening the capacities and the role of the CRPFs and Gram Panchayats in monitoring and protecting child rights. Special attention is being given to the girl child through setting up of Girl Youth Groups. Ranga Reddy is a laboratory for testing these new ideas and for redefining the mandate and objectives of the organization and the lessons learnt percolate to other areas where the movement is not so advanced.


The following are some of the key initiatives that have been taken to widen and deepen the scope of MVF's programme:

4.1 In-School Issues: Age 6-14

Quality of Education: An Ongoing Issue

In the first phase, the focus was on getting children to school and retaining them there as well as getting teachers to school and making them regular in their attendance. In areas where this has been achieved, the main concern now is with improving the quality of in-school interactions in mainstream government schools. Interventions to improve the quality of classroom teaching have





been an on-going component of MVF's work for nearly a decade now. The concern about the quality of education in government schools was a refrain that was repeated time and again in our meetings with parents, members of the community, schoolteachers, CRPFs, Panchayats, youth groups and MVF field staff. Not surprisingly, the push for quality is most evident in villages where the community has been mobilized and has been successful in achieving 100 percent enrolments and where there has been a shift in community perceptions about what constitutes quality. At first this meant a school with regular teacher attendance and one that could retain children, particularly older children, with attention shifting gradually to the quality of learning that takes place within the school.

MVF first took up the issue of quality in 2001 when it launched the Learning Guarantee Programme on grounds that by failing to guarantee quality education the school was denying children their rights. Eight schools volunteered to join the experimental phase and agreed to work with an external specialist, who trained them in evaluation techniques, activity based learning and academic planning. Parents, as well as the entire village community, were involved in this process. The schools had to convene meetings with parents to tell them that they had fallen behind in guaranteeing education to children. They also had to secure the parents' agreement to the temporary regrouping of classes. MVF prepared the community simultaneously to understand the objectives of the learning guarantee programme. They were trained to ask technical questions about quality, such as, "What should a child know in class 4?" The 8 initial participants acted as resource schools from where the programme was disseminated to schools in Ranga Reddy district. This programme was later taken over by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme in Andhra Pradesh.

The issue of quality was taken up again by MVF in 2007 in collaboration with the Centre for Good Governance.² The aim of

² For details on this initiative see, Darshana Patel et al (2009), "Improving Student Enrollment and Teacher Absenteeism Outcomes Through Social Accountability Interventions in Nalgonda and Adilabad Districts, Andhra Pradesh, India", Social Accountability Series, South Asia Sustainable Development Department, Case Study 8, November.

this exercise was to develop a community scorecard that could be used by the community to monitor and give feedback on the delivery of education services at the village level. This social accountability intervention was piloted in 20 government schools in Nalgonda and Adilabad Districts. One year after the intervention, positive behavioural and institutional changes were recorded in children, parents, community, schools and local government. Both districts saw a 10% drop in teacher absenteeism, a significant decrease in school dropout rates and 100% enrolment of children in 8 of the 20 villages. This programme has also been adopted by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme.

Countering Gender Bias

Efforts to counter gender bias have intensified as several new programmes have been initiated to retain girl children in school and enable them to continue their education from one level to the next. Girl Child Committees, comprising of students from class 6-10 have been set up in schools to monitor health and nutrition levels, provide family counseling and get information on reproductive health issues. A seminar is held after the class 10 examination to counsel them on the educational avenues that they can take up in the future. Gender issues are also being taken up systematically by the Girl Youth Groups (see section 5.3 below). An earlier evaluation of MVF's programme from 2000-2005 had suggested the identification and creation of alternative opportunities for adolescent girls as a natural extension of the organization's activities for the girl child.³ This evaluation had also recommended a greater involvement of girls and women in leading the struggle for their own rights. It was heartening to note that both recommendations had been taken on board during the current period under review through the formation of Girl Child Committees and Girl Youth Groups.

³ Aditya Mukherjee, Urmila Sarkar and Ratna Sudarshan (2005), "MVF: An Evaluation of the Programme 'Elimination of Child Labour Through the Universalisation of Elementary Education'", Evaluation conducted for the MVF-EU Donor Consortium, mimeo.



Prevention of Child Marriage

Prevention of child marriage is another major activity that is being undertaken in a systematic manner. This practice infringes upon the human rights of children, especially girls, and prevents them from pursuing their education in middle or high school. Data collected by MVF show that there has been a substantial reduction in child marriages in their programme area. For example, in Arvapally Mandal in Nalgonda District there would have been 70 child marriages in a year just four years ago, but now there are just 8 or 9 and these are conducted in utmost secrecy. A second pattern that the data reveal is the steady rise in the average age of child marriage between 2000, when it was 8.33 years, and 2006 when it had risen to 14.80 years (see Tables 1 and 2). Data on child marriage are now systematically collected at the village level to allow proactive identification and regular tracking of girls who are deemed to be vulnerable to such pressures from their families. From the feedback that we received in the field, it was clear that the institution of child marriage is being questioned and rejected, a welcome development that can be directly linked to MVF campaigns and interventions.

Table 1: Average Age at Marriage, 2000-2006

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Number	3	4	6	9	12	29	5
Average	8.33	9.50	9.50	11.11	11.92	13.13	14.80

Source: Survey of 70 Child Marriages in Nalgonda District; April 2006.

Table 2: Child Marriages by Age Group between 2000-2006

Age at Marriage	8-9	10-11	12-13	14-15	16-17
Number	10	19	23	11	5
% (of 68)					

Source: Survey of 70 Child Marriages in Nalgonda District; April 2006.

Other School-Related Issues

Other school related issues that are being taken up include action to ensure retention of children in schools. Nearly 90% of children who complete the residential bridge course then move to social welfare hostels to continue their education in formal schools. Hostels are notorious for their poor infrastructure, distance from schools and pilferage of food and other amenities meant for children and constitute a significant push factor for school dropouts. Hostel Development Committees have been set up to regularly monitor living conditions in the hostels, find solutions for undertaking infrastructural improvements and to provide 'Vidya Volunteers' to help the children with their home work.

A new generation of issues is emerging, and interventions are in the process of being developed to deal with corporal punishment in government and private schools as well as in the family. Another challenge is presented by the poor infrastructural facilities in government schools. Lack of water and toilets is a major problem in the majority of schools and children have to resort to using open spaces around the school. It was suggested that children don't eat or drink anything while at school for fear that they might need to use a toilet. A wall newspaper that was set up by MVF in 96 primary schools in Nalgonda District where children were invited to give their opinions on what was good, bad and innovative about their school revealed that children perceived the lack of toilets to be the number one problem. The CRPF in Nalgonda has responded by making this a priority and the Panchayat education sub-committee is also taking up this issue. See Tables 3 and 4 for the infrastructural improvements that have taken place as a result of MVF's intervention.

**Table 3: Improvements in School Infrastructure 2005-2009:
Ranga Reddy District**

Year	No. of Schools Upgraded	No. of Additional Rooms Constructed	Toilet Facility	Compound Wall
2005-2006	62	83	47	65
2007	8	67	63	14
2008	11	103	114	42
2009	NA	NA	NA	NA
Total	81	253	224	121

Source: MVF data

**Table 4: Improvements in School Infrastructure 2005-2009:
Nalgonda District**

Year	No. of Schools Upgraded	No. of Additional Rooms Constructed	Toilet Facility	Compound Wall
2005-2006	7	144	118	39
2007	13	129	43	1
2008	2	39	66	7
2009	NA	62	94	58
Total	22	374	321	105

Source: MVF data

4.2 Catching Them Young: Age 0-5

The importance of the early months and years for the healthy growth and development of the child is well established. A link has also been made between early childhood interventions and school readiness. International research confirms that attendance in pre-school programmes is associated with a smooth transition to school and improved performance. The health and nutritional status of the mother also have a bearing on the future of the child, as does the family's access to health services, safe water, housing and employment. It is no surprise then that in 2004 MVF responded to a demand from the community and extended its programme downwards to include children in the 0-5 year age group. Data collected at the village level in Ranga Reddy District revealed that 50% of deliveries took place at home and infant mortality was high

and often went unrecorded.⁴ Moreover, infant deaths were taken as a personal issue and not a matter for community action. A pilot project was initiated in Mominpet mandal in Ranga Reddy district with the aim of increasing awareness of pregnancy-related issues in the community, in the family and in pregnant women themselves and improving their access to health services.⁵ This programme was later extended beyond safe pregnancy to include the health and wellbeing of all children.


Using the same approach as it did for mobilizing the community on child labour and education, MVF started by creating an awareness of children's right to health. The aim was to make the community responsible for the wellbeing of all children born in the village. It was agreed that the Gram Panchayats would take on the task of monitoring all children in the village with the help of CRPFs, women's groups and youth groups. The issues they are taking up include safe pregnancy and follow up, birth registration, immunization, nutrition, registration of maternal and child mortality, ensuring attendance of children in anganwadis and monitoring of the anganwadis and the supplementary nutrition available through the Integrated Child Development Services programme. With this widening of activities, there are new needs to identify, track and monitor the various interventions focusing on the 0-5 age group, including bringing the operation of anganwadis and of the ICDS programme as a whole under systematic scrutiny. It also means that the MVF database is extended, in some respects, to the entire child population in the villages in which it is active.

4.3 Beyond High School: Age 15-18

Activities for this age group include convincing parents to allow their children, particularly girls, to continue their education after high school and facilitating the process of admissions to college

⁴ See Dipa Sinha (2006), "Rethinking ICDS: A Rights Based Perspective", *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 26.

⁵ For details of this pilot intervention, see Dipa Sinha (2008), "Empowering Communities to Make Pregnancy Safer: An Intervention in Rural Andhra Pradesh", Health and Population Innovation Fellowship Programme, Working Paper No. 5, New Delhi: Population Council.



and university for those who wish to pursue further education. Prevention of forced marriages is another new activity that is aimed specifically at girls in this age group. While there has been a reduction in the incidence of child marriage, it is still quite common for parents to arrange the marriage of their daughters as soon as they reach or complete class 10. MVF staff and volunteers feel that there is a need to change mindsets again as parents feel that education beyond class 10 is a waste for girls. An effort is made to convince them with counter arguments about the value of higher education, not just for job seeking but also for self-development and of the advantages of delayed marriage and delayed child bearing.


**5**

THE SECOND PHASE: FROM MOBILIZATION TO INSTITUTIONALIZATION

From its inception, MVF has followed the policy of strengthening existing local institutions such as village Panchayats, youth groups, women's groups and School Education Committees to become champions of children's rights and to monitor child labour and education in their village after the initial mobilization campaigns are over. It has also been instrumental in setting up new pressure groups to deal with issues as they come up. Some examples of these include the BKVV/ AITFCR or the All India Teachers' Forum for Child Rights, Child Rights Protection Forums and the Youth Forum for the Elimination of Child Labour. This process has continued apace in the second phase, and has taken on added urgency, as MVF is preparing and strengthening these groups to take independent responsibility for monitoring child rights after the withdrawal of MVF. The following are some of the key initiatives that have been taken to ensure sustainability beyond the life cycle of the current project:

5.1 Setting up Child Rights Protection Forums

The CRPFs are at the forefront of MVF's efforts to set up viable local institutions to protect child rights. The genesis of the CRPFs is in the Child Rights Protection Committees (CRPCs) that were at first set up spontaneously at the village level to deal with issues such as prevention of a child marriage or release of children from bonded labour. Membership was drawn from local bodies, women's groups, school education committees, youth groups, local politicians, elected representatives of local government and even erstwhile employers of child labour. Success in achieving these tasks gave the CRPCs the impetus to go beyond single issues and take on wider tasks, and set up a more formal structure with regular



meetings, an agenda and networking with other district and state level committees. In 2004, the CRPCs were registered as Child Rights Protection Forums to allow MVF to provide training and support to these groups in a structured manner and to give the entity a clear, independent identity.⁶ A membership drive was held and a registration fee of Rs. 25 was set. The objectives of the CRPF were defined as follows:

- ❖ Work towards building a social norm for protection of child rights as listed in the UNCRC.
- ❖ Ensure total abolition of child labour and ensure that every child goes to school and is retained there.
- ❖ Act as a pressure group on all public institutions concerning child rights.
- ❖ Involve the related government departments of the State as well as local government bodies and elected representatives in child protection activities.

A four-tiered structure was developed with CRPFs at the village, mandal, district and the apex body at the state level. Similar CRPFs have been set up in Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu and these bodies have united to form a national CRPF. Altogether, some 80,000 individuals are currently registered as life members of the CRPF and are active in monitoring child related institutions and ensuring that no rights violations occur in their designated area. The CRPFs do not implement programmes; they play the role of watchdog and act as a pressure group to protect children's rights. A selection of the concrete issues taken up by CRPFs is given below:

- ❖ Release children from work and enrol them in bridge camps or in formal school;
- ❖ Motivate and resolve issues with employers of child labour;
- ❖ Help children who have dropped out with readmission to school;

⁶ See Communication for Development and Learning (2008), "Our Children: Our Responsibility, A Commitment by Child Rights Protection Forum, An Initiative of M.V. Foundation", CRPF and MVF: Secunderabad, for a detailed account of the inception, mandate and working of CRPFs.

- ❖ Mobilize communities against child marriage and corporal punishment;
- ❖ Monitor child related institutions such as schools, hostels, residential centres, anganwadi centres, health centres; and
- ❖ Monitor meals in schools and anganwadi centres.


Box 1

Role of CRPFs in Releasing Children From Cottonseed Farms

Child labour is rife in cottonseed production in Andhra Pradesh. Children are lured into the cottonseed farms by incentives such as ribbons, footwear, sweets and picnics. Some growers appoint child leaders – one for each group of 10 children – and give them incentives such as double wages for bringing children to work. Children are paid a wage of Rs. 40 per day against the normal daily rate for children of Rs. 20 in this area. The adult wage in this area is Rs. 100. Some cottonseed growers have closed down their plantations because they are not profitable without child labour. At least 40 – 60 children were employed in cottonseed production in Bashirabad Mandal. The CRPF members first tried to convince the plantation owner to release the children, and when this failed they threatened him with legal action. The owner responded by shifting production to a village in Karnataka, which is 4 kilometres away, and transported the children there. The CRPF followed him there with journalists who took photographs of the children spraying the fields. They held village meetings to inform parents about the ill effects of child labour and about insecticide poisoning and kept this up till they were successful in getting the children released from these farms and mainstreamed into formal education.

5.2 Strengthening Gram Panchayats to Protect Child Rights

Increasing the involvement of Gram Panchayats in monitoring child rights at the village level is another avenue through which MVF has sought to institutionalize its programme. Gram Panchayats are ideally placed to take on this task, as it is within their brief to monitor local institutions such as schools, social welfare hostels, health centres and anganwadis and mobilize resources for infrastructure development. They have the authority to call on the local police to help in the release of bonded labour children thus providing the crucial link with officialdom. Elected representatives have also begun to realize that associating with a programme that focuses on the protection of child rights wins them respect and consequently greater authority in the village. In fact, this is



becoming a moral issue at the local level that no elected representative can afford to ignore.

MVF is strengthening the role of Gram Panchayats by providing them with technical assistance and training on child rights. Data collection as a mechanism for monitoring the situation of all children in the village is stressed and Panchayats are encouraged to set up sub-committees for education, nutrition and health, with each committee taking responsibility for schools, anganwadis and health centres respectively. The sub-committees are expected to make regular monitoring visits to these institutions to assess problems, find solutions within a set time frame and review progress at the next meeting. MVF has assisted the education sub-committees to develop a checklist of 25 points on the basis of which they monitor schools on their monthly visits. The nutrition and health sub-committees are responsible for monitoring mother and child health and nutrition issues, provide support to pregnant women, ensure birth registration and immunization of all children and deal with low birth weight babies. In addition, the Gram Panchayat is expected to be pro-active in seeking assistance on child related issues that it cannot solve locally from relevant authorities at the Mandal and District levels.

In each village the local CRPF is being trained to keep up the pressure on Gram Panchayats and monitor their performance. Several Sarpanches and Gram Panchayats in MVF field areas are now actively involved in monitoring child rights in their villages (see Box 2) but the process is not yet complete. In 2008, MVF started a new activity to grade Panchayats in terms of their performance in monitoring child rights. The results of this exercise will be announced in January 2010. The Panchayats are scored on the following ten activities, with one point awarded for successfully conducting each activity:

1. Maintaining a village profile
2. Creation of Sub Committees for monitoring health, education and nutrition
3. Monthly visits by sub committees to monitor institutions (health centre, schools, anganwadi centre)

4. Convening meetings once in 3 months of Panchayat Level Convergency Committee consisting of all three sub committees
5. Maintaining files
6. Keeping a register of minutes
7. Display names of Panchayat members
8. Display names of committee members
9. Maintaining a register of births, deaths and marriages in the village
10. Representations to the district level

Box 2

A Model Sarpanch

Mahendra Gowd is the Sarpanch of Tallapally Village in Ranga Reddy District. He joined the CRPF in 1996/97. At that time there were 87 children out of school in the mandal. The CRPF made a plan for the mandal and he went from door-to-door to motivate parents to send their children to school. He also worked on the issue of child marriage, on motivating girls to join school and involved the then Sarpanch in their programme. Mahendra Gowd stood for elections in 2006 and won. At that time not all members of the panchayat were aware of the MVF programme but now they are all on board because of the regular meetings he holds on this subject. These meetings include ward members and representatives of CRPF, DWACRA and youth groups. They visit the 4 government schools in their village twice a month to monitor attendance of teachers and students and monitor learning levels of children. The issue of corporal punishment in both government and private schools has also been taken up. He uses a carrot and stick approach with the schools. Once he made an impromptu visit to a school and found that no teachers were present. He took school assembly and started teaching. This incident was reported in the press; the teachers were shamed and also officially reprimanded. He supports the schools by collecting funds for furniture and other programmes. At first the parents used to say that they needed their children to tend to goats and cows but there is no child labour in the village now and no marriage below the age of 18. The Panchayat monitors child rights in the 0-18 age group and collects data on a range of health, nutrition and development issues such as pregnancies, deliveries, maternal and child mortality, immunization, birth registration, anganwadi attendance by age and weight, school attendance, marriage and adolescent girls. These data are proudly displayed outside the Panchayat office for all to see.



5.3 Girl Youth Groups

Village youth have long proved to be among the best allies of the MVF in its campaign against child labour and its drive to enrol children in formal education. They assist the programme in several ways. They debate, argue and contest long held positions about the link between poverty and child labour and work to create a societal consensus on the protection of child rights. They keep the discussion on these issues alive by convening meetings with the community, motivating employers to release child labour and organizing voluntary labour for improving the school environment, intervening in child marriages and accessing medical help, when needed. They put pressure on schools and monitor children who have left the bridge camps and joined the formal schools. They maintain contact with the Gram Panchayat and involve the Sarpanch in the programme. 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.

A more recent, and innovative, development has been the formation of Girl Youth Groups. While youth groups are an integral part of the landscape of every village in Andhra Pradesh, their membership is made up almost exclusively of young men. Earlier attempts by MVF to get girls to join these groups were not very successful, as village culture did not make it conducive for girls and boys to work together. In 2002, MVF called a meeting of girls in Class 10 in Shankarpally Mandal to discuss child marriage, discontinuation of education by girls and gender-specific health issues and encouraged them to get involved in confronting these issues. There was a feeling that many of these themes were not being taken up by the male youth groups, so after some deliberation the girls decided to set up their own independent group in 2006 (see box 3).

In a meeting with the Girl Youth Group in Bulkapur Village - called “Mother Theresa Yuvajana Sangam” - we were informed

that the group had 30 members in the village. In Shankarpally Mandal there are Girl Youth Groups in 25 Panchayats with a total membership of 750. The activities that they undertake are:

- ❖ Collect data on number of girls in school and college and discuss their problems;
- ❖ Motivate non-school going children to join school;
- ❖ Visit schools to check on dropouts, then visit the homes to motivate them back to school;
- ❖ Involve the Sarpanch in motivating parents of drop outs and non-school going girls;
- ❖ Attend meetings of the Gram Panchayat Education, Health and Nutrition Sub-Committees, of which they are members;
- ❖ Ensure that all children completing Class 7 can continue their education. The village school is upto Class 7;
- ❖ Ensure that girls don't drop out after Class 10;
- ❖ Keep track of school grades;
- ❖ Quality control of mid-day meals by eating regularly with the children;
- ❖ Visit schools, anganwadis and health centre once in 10 days;
- ❖ Monitor all pregnant women in the village and ensure that they get regular check ups; and
- ❖ Intervening to prevent child marriages and forced marriage.

The group gets guidance and support from MVF staff. They work on all child rights issues up to Class 10; beyond that age group they deal only with problems specific to girls. The members of the girl youth group feel that the CRPF and male youth group in their village have become more active after seeing the involvement of the girl youth group.

On Republic Day 2006 Girl Youth Strengthen their Movement for Assertion of Rights

A silent movement is being built by young girls in more than 300 villages in Ranga Reddy District, where they have formed youth associations. Each youth group has a membership of 20-30 girls. While most villages have existing youth groups for young men, it is for the first time that girls have a forum for themselves where they can share their anxieties, plan for themselves and assert their views as a collective. Young girls in the age group 14-20 have, through these youth groups, stopped child marriages, brought girls back into schools, convinced parents to allow them to continue studying, and so on. They have also given petitions to gram panchayats asking for a place to conduct their meetings, a space to play etc. In about 200 villages, these girls have decided that this year [2006] on the Republic Day they would also hoist the national flag in the village. This is indeed a significant event in the true spirit of the Indian Constitution. By hoisting the flag, girls are asserting that they cannot be ignored any longer. They too have rights and it is time these rights are protected. The entire village takes pride in the girls with the gram panchayats, the youth associations and women's groups contributing towards the expenses for hoisting the flag. Let us all support the cause of these young girls, by joining their movement for assertion of social rights.

by the CRPF of Ranga Reddy

Source: Brittany Gleixner-Hayat, "Realising Child Rights: A Focus on the Girl Child", MVF, Secunderabad, 15 February 2007.


6

DISSEMINATION OF THE MODEL

MVF has accumulated a sufficient body of expertise to act as a National Resource Agency for providing training and technical inputs to both NGOs and government agencies. It provides support to individuals and to spontaneous grassroots initiatives aiming to bring about change in their own area. It has made an impact on government policies and programmes on child labour and education at the state level and nationally through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme. It has been successful in forming partnerships with other like-minded organisations, both in India as well as in the rest of the world and is linked to national and international efforts through its membership and active involvement in the 'National Alliance for the Fundamental Right to Education' and the 'Global March against Child Labour'. An important development in this regard is the participation of MVF in the international campaign 'Stop Child Labour: School is the Best Place to Work' run by a consortium of European organizations (see section 6.3).

Calls for training, materials, information sharing and support have increased and MVF has responded by setting up a National Resource Centre that allows it to undertake dissemination and training in a more systematic and structured manner. Several channels are used to disseminate the approach to potential partners. Training and orientation programmes are held for government officials, gram panchayat members, teachers, youth groups, CRPFs, community based organizations and NGOs from Andhra Pradesh, other states and internationally. A multi-pronged training methodology is used that goes beyond classroom teaching. There is no training manual with a blueprint for replication. Instead, a module has been developed that conveys the basic principles of





the MVF philosophy and approach. The idea is to impart a framework that can be adapted to different situations. This training is supplemented with hands-on exposure to bridge camps, government schools and social welfare hostels and interactions with government officials, women's groups, youth leaders and members of CRPFs and panchayats.

6.1 MVF Resource Persons: An Innovative Approach to Dissemination

In addition, MVF also provides trained resource persons who assist state governments as well as a variety of NGOs *in situ*. Experience has shown that this kind of sustained support is more effective in helping organisations to internalize MVF's philosophy and translate the key principles into locally relevant strategies. MVF has provided resource persons to a range of government programmes in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar and to NGOs in Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and the neighbouring country of Nepal. The resource persons stay with their host organizations for a period ranging from 6 months to a few years. During this period, they embed themselves in the organization, acting as catalysts and facilitators and providing training and technical support where needed. The entire process is demand driven and follow-up is provided only when requested.


MVF resource persons have succeeded in demonstrating that the model works in a range of contexts outside of Andhra Pradesh. It has been successfully transferred to urban areas in Bhopal, Patna and Delhi and perhaps more significantly to Naxalite areas in Bihar and Chhattisgarh and areas of ULFA-BODO militancy in Assam. Residential Bridge Courses have been set up in these conflict areas and it is possible for government officials to visit them without any interference from the militants. In Madhya Pradesh, the resource persons have extended the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme to tribal areas that had never before been visited by any government official. Maintaining neutrality is a skill that has been ingrained in the MVF staff and they use it to advantage, especially in setting up the programme in these difficult situations. They win over

communities by keeping their focus on the issue of children's education, not expressing opinions on other issues and by showing results. MVF is confident that given sufficient time and resources it can replicate its programme to any context or environment.

However, there are many challenges that the resource persons face in securing acceptance of the model. The first of these is to get organizations to internalize and act on the principle of inclusion. Even when organisations are convinced in principle they often find it difficult to operationalize it in practice. This could be because their mandate requires them to work with a particular disadvantaged group like Dalits or Muslims and working with 'all' children would require a change of mandate. For most of these organizations, including 'all' children in their programme often means including 'all' children from their particular target group. The advantages or necessity of extending to children from outside the target group is often difficult to comprehend and to justify, given their own organizational rhetoric of working with the poorest of the poor or working for the uplift of the weakest communities. NGOs may also be limited by their donors who provide funding for specific groups and taking a more inclusive approach would be seen as diluting their focus on these groups. Even when staff at the grassroots are convinced, they may find it difficult to argue with the heads of their organizations or with their donors.

A different set of issues emerges when working in partnership with government agencies. A major advantage is the possibility of working on a scale that is far beyond the scope of most NGOs. The infrastructure and resources available to the government allow for a large number of children, teachers and bureaucrats to be reached. However, this is offset by the enormous task involved in motivating the government bureaucracy and getting it to change its entrenched work culture. In general, the main interest of the bureaucracy is to reach targets in terms of enrolments. The resource persons coax them into getting involved with the 'process' of getting children into school, which requires motivating and involving communities, holding meetings with local stakeholders and becoming accountable to the community. The sustainability of these initiatives once the resource persons leave is also an issue. This is countered





by involving Gram Panchayats in the programme, setting up CRPFs, creating local resource persons and developing networks with local NGOs in the hope that they will be in a position to continue the work. Other problems include release of funds in a timely manner, information flows between the village and district levels and misuse of funds and resources.

6.2 Replicating the MVF Approach in Madhya Pradesh: Partnership with a State Agency⁷

In July 2004, the Rajya Shiksha Kendra, the government department responsible for implementing the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) Programme in Madhya Pradesh, invited MVF to provide them with capacity building support to mainstream out of school children into the formal education system. MVF responded by deputing 25 resource persons to work in Madhya Pradesh; one resource person was allocated per district, with the exception of Jhabua district that had three on account of the special needs of this area, in addition to a State Coordinator and a financial manager. The SSA programme is being implemented statewide, with intensive support from MVF in 21 of the 48 districts. The programme has been designed to take on board the special needs of the hard to reach tribal and scheduled caste groups that make up nearly 20 and 15 percent of the population of the state, respectively. These groups have traditionally remained outside mainstream society and are backward on all indicators of development, including education.


This partnership raises several important issues. Can a successful NGO experience from Andhra Pradesh be transferred to another location where the local context, the social fabric and needs are quite different and pose their own unique challenges? Can the government machinery substitute for what is essentially a local movement in Andhra Pradesh and does it have the adaptability and internal learning capacity to reshape the key

⁷ This section is based on an earlier visit to Madhya Pradesh to review MVF's partnership with the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme in the state. For details see: Rekha Wazir (2007), "Replicating the MVF Approach in Madhya Pradesh: Reflections on an Innovative NGO/ Government Partnership", Mimeo, July 2007.

elements of the MVF approach to suit its needs? Despite the considerable challenges posed by the nature of the target group, the SSA programme has made remarkable strides since the partnership with MVF was formalized in 2004. By March 2007, 809 Residential Bridge Camps and 6000 Non Residential Bridge Camps had been opened in the entire state. It is quite telling that 650 of these Residential Bridge Camps are in the 21 districts where MVF has a presence. The education and school enrolment landscape of these districts is changing in perceptible ways and if this momentum continues, they could soon show remarkable improvements in enrolment and retention rates, reduction in child labour and an invigoration of the educational system and the bureaucracy.

The programme has succeeded in creating a demand for education among tribal communities that are cut off from mainstream life and are not used to thinking about education as something that is readily available or appropriate for their children. Parents are becoming aware that given a facilitating environment, their children are capable of making remarkable progress and completing their education. They are also beginning to develop a faith in the ability of the government to deliver on promises. Significant sections of the bureaucracy are getting energized and beginning to work and think 'outside the box' and concerned citizens and local government officials are forming themselves into *Bal Adhikar Suraksha Samitis* (BASS) or child rights protection forums to monitor the educational status of the children on an ongoing basis.

The 25 resource persons that MVF has deputed to Madhya Pradesh are the true lynchpins of this successful partnership. They provide the driving force that ensures the vibrancy of the programme as well as the glue that holds its various elements together. They play a commendable role for a number of reasons. These resource persons have left their homes and families in the south to travel north to Madhya Pradesh with a commitment to the goal of eradicating child labour and universalizing education and a desire to share the lessons they have learnt from their



successful experience in Andhra Pradesh. They have traversed not just a huge distance but also crossed cultural and linguistic barriers. Each one of them has an intimate knowledge of the districts they are based in, they travel regularly to remote villages and hamlets to mobilize support for the programme, they have built networks and alliances with local leaders, resource persons and officials, and proved to be a thorn in the side of unwilling and recalcitrant bureaucrats. All this is done keeping a low profile, by showing by example and by facilitating rather than antagonizing their counterparts in the bureaucracy.

The main function of the resource persons is to act as catalysts. Their task is not to take over the work of the RSK, nor are they responsible for implementing the programme. Instead, they work as facilitators, provide training and technical support and nudge the government machinery to do its work. Stimulating a demand for education among the parents and the community is only one half of the task and perhaps less daunting than transforming the ingrained ways of government and bureaucracy. Successfully influencing these supply side and institutional factors is the key to launching a successful programme and process for universalisation of education. A visible change in the mindsets and working styles of the bureaucracy is one of the most dramatic consequences of this partnership. Some are beginning to see their job as a 'mission' and not just a nine-to-five job, others are beginning to think and act in innovative ways. Surveying each village to get accurate data is a thankless and difficult task for various reasons and it has taken a concerted effort on the part of the MVF resource persons to get RSK officials involved in this process.

The collaboration between MVF and the government of Madhya Pradesh has been very important in demonstrating that given the right motivation and support, even the government machinery can respond in creative and flexible ways to achieve its goals. The key issue is, will the initial interest of the state government in adopting this innovative NGO intervention be carried into a willingness and capacity to revamp the overall educational structure so that it can respond to the new challenges that are being thrown

up? Equally significantly, will this commitment be backed up by adequate resources? Ultimately, the sustainability and long-term impact of the SSA programme will depend on how serious the Madhya Pradesh government is about realizing the goal of universal education in the state.

6.3 International Advocacy: ‘Stop Child Labour: School is the Best Place to Work Campaign’

The MVF model provides the inspiration and the driving force for the international campaign ‘Stop Child Labour – School is the Best Place to Work’ managed by organizations in six European countries (Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Ireland and the Netherlands) in cooperation with partners around the world. The campaign aims to provide support and facilitate exchanges between partners in the South who wish to work on MVF’s principle that ‘all children must be in school and no child must work’. MVF has hosted youth groups from the Netherlands and teachers’ groups from Morocco and Zimbabwe; it provides technical support in implementing the campaign in various Central American and African countries; and it also provides training in the various aspects of the campaign to abolish child labour and universalize education. In this connection, the campaign has organized exchange visits between partners in India, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ethiopia, Ghana, Morocco, Albania and Guatemala in an attempt to get them to learn from each other and from MVF. MVF is also an integral part of the lobbying efforts of the campaign towards the European Union and various international agencies such as the ILO and the World Bank.



7

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

7.1 Impact on Children

MVF programmes have had a profound impact on children in its project areas. This conclusion is incontrovertible and is confirmed by statistical evidence. Enrolment rates have risen dramatically and have been sustained, dropout rates have plummeted and been kept down, the number of child labour free villages has steadily risen and the impact is all the more visible in the case of girls. The improvements apply not only to the new entrants to the educational system, but also to the intractable category of children who had missed the boat earlier and had to be identified, persuaded and successfully enabled to go through bridge schools to join formal schooling at the appropriate age level. Compared with official data for Andhra Pradesh, or indeed the country as a whole, this represents an achievement of the highest order.

A comparison is possible between the school enrolment profiles for Andhra Pradesh as a whole, and Shankarpally Mandal, the original home base of MVF, where the original cohorts of children were enrolled through the efforts of MVF more than ten years ago. This allows a direct comparison of the cross-section profile of class-wise registrations for each class between Class I and X for the two areas. The data tell a remarkable story. For Andhra Pradesh as a whole, the enrolments for Class X form only 60 per cent of those for Class I; for Shankarpally, the corresponding figure is close to 100 per cent. This is a massive difference in the rates of attrition confirming the vastness of the wastage of life chances, as well as cumulative resources invested in children that then dropped out, for children in Andhra Pradesh as a whole. This direct comparison provides a startling indication both of the achieved impact, as well as the future potential, of the MVF approach, were it to be taken to scale.

The number of children mainstreamed through the bridge camps and the increase in enrolment and retention rates are impressive in themselves but they cannot tell the whole story of the transformative effect on the lives and futures of these children. It is a sobering exercise to pause and reflect on what the lives of these children would have been had they continued in their trajectories of child and bonded labour and early marriage. A quick survey of 14 children (11 girls and 3 boys) from Ranga Reddy district - all of who had been through the bridge camps and were now in classes 5 – 10 - that we conducted during fieldwork revealed the following. Before joining school via the bridge camps, 4 of these children had herded cattle; 4 worked in agriculture – on their own family farm or as bonded labour; 4 (girls) helped with housework and looked after siblings; 1 had worked in a stone quarry; and 1 (boy) claimed that he did “nothing”. We found similar patterns among other groups of children that we met during the field visits. Each of these children has a story to tell – encapsulated by the powerful experience of Kiran (See Box 4).


Box 4

Kiran - An inspirational Story

Kiran is currently studying in one of the best colleges in Hyderabad. She speaks passionately about the need to eradicate child labour and make the government more accountable. Kiran has spoken about these issues at debates in Andhra Pradesh and the rest of India and her powerful delivery has earned her acclaim and a meeting with Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh. This is worlds away from her childhood in Bihar where she witnessed her mother being murdered by her father and escaped from a circus to which he subsequently sold her. With the help of a relative she came to Hyderabad and started working with a family as a domestic help. She was not paid any wages and was thrown out of the house one night after being accused of theft. Kiran spent the next few weeks sleeping rough and then got on to a train with the intention of committing suicide. A woman in the compartment pulled her back, gave her shelter for a period and eventually handed her over to the sub-inspector of police in Shankarpally. A kindly man, he took her home and asked her if she would like to study. After making some enquiries, he heard from a Sarpanch about MVF and sent her to the Alur Bridge Camp, from where she joined school and is now studying in university. Kiran is one of the driving forces behind “Vimukti: Liberated for Liberation” – an organization founded by MVF alumni.

Source: Narrated by Kiran.⁸

⁸ See also the longer case study about Kiran, conducted by Anjali Shenoy, an intern, which is available at MVF.



It is impossible to quantify the positive transformational impact that the programme has had on children, but its empowering effect is clear to see when one speaks to them in the field. They are proud of their achievements, several of them have already completed high school and are now engaged in further studies or have secured jobs and many girls have been able to postpone their marriage and pursue an education instead. There is no doubt that had it not been for the MVF intervention, *all* these children would have continued as child labour and would have moved on to unskilled work on daily wages as adults. The empowering effect is visible regardless of what it implies for their entry into, or chances in the job market. Education is not a sufficient but a necessary precondition on this pathway towards achieving full citizenship.


There cannot be a more powerful confirmation of this life transformational impact than the efforts of children who have been through the MVF programme in keeping alive the discussion on child labour and education. The impetus for this came from a group of 21 students at Hyderabad University, who had been mainstreamed into school through the MVF bridge camps. All of them had previously worked—for the family or as bonded labour—in agriculture, herding goats and buffaloes and in hotels. They realized that there was very little understanding of child labour among their fellow students at university and they could see that child labour was rife in the city. After a series of discussions, they decided to register their own organization called Vimukti: Liberated for Liberation in 2007. By end 2009, Vimukti has succeeded in reaching a membership of 500 – some of them students, others already in employment and a few who have not been part of the MVF programme but have joined in solidarity. The aim of Vimukti is to raise awareness in society about child labour and bring this issue to the attention of policy makers. Their concrete activities include holding seminars on the topic of child labour, taking their colleagues and peers for field visits and motivating parents to send their children to school when they encounter cases of child labour.

7.2 Impact on Families

When assessing the impact of MVF activities on the family, the question most frequently raised by sceptics is that of the implications for the family of withdrawing children from labour and sending them to school instead. But this is far from being the only impact. Indeed, as the movement has evolved and matured, many new interfaces with family wellbeing have been opened up. There are new programmes of action against child marriages; and, separately for the further postponement of marriage in order to facilitate the entry of girls into tertiary education and professional careers. There is a strong drive against female infanticide. There are actions for the registration of all births and marriages; for the nutritional and overall care of pregnant women; for shifting to professionally supervised deliveries in proper medical facilities; for eliminating domestic violence and, related to it, the reunification of broken families through the intermediation of village Sarpanches. These new lines of action—discussed separately—have obvious implications for wellbeing within families. Yet, perhaps the single most contentious issue is the likely impact of the elimination of child labour and the universalisation of education on the resource balance of the household.

The issue pertains essentially to the hypothesized imperatives and constraints arising from household poverty. Detractors of attempts to eradicate child labour and universalize education frequently claim that doing so would have a negative impact on family poverty. It would reduce family income; increase the work burdens of poor parents; while the economic benefits of poor schooling are unproven. However, the experience of the MVF movement, confirmed during the field visits, provides a comprehensive rebuttal of “the poverty argument” for condoning child labour amongst poor families.

Several responses against the poverty argument emerged during the fieldwork. First: there were very many poor families that *did* send their children to school – so poverty could not be accepted uncritically as a binding constraint; so there were clearly other options and strategies that households could exercise. Second:



it was demonstrated that the incidence of non-school going children was also significant amongst families that were clearly not poor at all – for such households the “poverty argument, was irrelevant; it was an issue of attitudes and aspirations. Third: there were families where adults and children were locked in bonded labour arrangements – here the choice of schooling had been snatched away. Fourth: under the surface of the “we are too poor to send children to school” response, stronger forces were at work: a lack of socialization into the world of education; hostile responses from indifferent school establishments and officials; lack of knowledge of intimidating procedures for school entrance. Many poor parents, without any tradition of schooling in their families, were thwarted from sending their children to school, even though they aspired to. So they accepted and simply said: “we are poor and we cannot send our children to school”. The purveyors of the poverty argument wrongly accept this interpretation without critical investigation.

There is a paradox at work here. Before the big step of withdrawing a child from labour is taken, there is often much doubt, soul searching and resistance. Parents declare that they lack the resources to invest in their children’s education, especially girls, or that the child’s labour is crucial to the immediate survival of the family. However, once a child is secure in the new educational tract, family attitudes reflect nothing but a newfound satisfaction, pride and joy. The achievement is regarded not just as one of the child but also of the entire family. In the field, messages such as the following were conveyed to us repeatedly, with clarity and virtually without exception by parents, older siblings, grandparents and other members of the family:

- “Children go to school now and parents go to work.”
- “Parents are respected more when they send their children to school.”
- “Parents did not require children’s income. They needed trust in schools.”
- “Parents are more aware and more responsible for their children.”

In fact children are now seen as worthy of investment rather than as providers of supplementary contributions to the family budget. The same parents who earlier contended that they could not manage without the labour of their children, are now opting out of the government school system and sending their children to relatively expensive private schools in their quest for the best education they can afford. Some private schools in nearby towns are facilitating this by sending buses to rural areas to pick up children and many parents do not mind paying the additional transportation costs.

What is observed in this transformation is a change in character and appreciation of inter-generational transfers between children and parents arising from the so-called trade-off between child labour and education. When the child went to work, various ascriptions were constructed around the notion of the child wishing to make a sacrifice in order to help the poor parents. The entire future life path of the child was effectively mortgaged to the perceived short-term needs of the family. Fundamentally, this was a transaction with a negative polarity – where the child suffered permanent loss and damage; through sending the child to school, this is transformed into an exchange with intrinsically positive attributes.

All this does not deny the hardship of families, and the fact that stopping child labour and starting schooling would shift the family financial equation. But what the poverty argument fails to do is to explore the array of diverse responses open to the family to find a new household equilibrium built around the new realities – where the child goes not to work but to school. Many strategies are possible, involving the switching of patterns of livelihood, labour, and expenditure within the family; the reassignment of roles and tasks. The responses that we received to this question during our meetings with parents, children, local government officials, CRPF members and MV Foundation staff were unequivocal and universally positive:

- “Eliminating child labour is reducing poverty. Adult wages have increased because of the work of MV Foundation and the CRPFs.”



- “People are more aware of minimum wages and bargain for them.”
- “A child does not have bargaining power. Employment opportunities for parents are increasing and they can bargain for better wages.”
- “On cotton seed farms children do a lot of work for little pay. If two children from a family work, they earn Rs. 40 - 45. Now the father goes to work and earns Rs. 150.”

Parents adjust to the loss of child labour in a variety of ways:

- “Children used to tend goats and cattle. Now one adult is doing this for the entire village.”
- “Adults spent children’s income on alcohol. Now they save.”
- “Domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning and collecting water were done by women and girls. Now men share in the burden.”
- “Families now plan and discuss how to share work.”
- “There is more equality in the village now. Erstwhile employers of child labour and their wives have to do some work themselves.”
- “NREGA has had a positive impact. Only adults are allowed to work in this scheme.”
- “Parents have to work more now but they want to do it for their children’s future.”

Of course, there remain some especially intractable cases where difficult household circumstances raise economic barriers that the family is unable to resolve from within its own resources. When there is such unyielding financial hardship, MVF cadres seek special customized solutions: for example, the Sarpanch could be involved to see if the family could be made a beneficiary of the Annapurna welfare scheme. In other cases, efforts are made to raise scholarships or stipends for children from especially impecunious families with little room for maneuver. An example is provided by the case of Mallama (See Box 5) which embodies the potential of education as a route out of poverty. We can record this outcome, in the first place, only because Mallama, her daughter

and MVF rejected the poverty argument and the predictable life of poverty to which the girl would otherwise have been condemned. Beyond the issue of returns to education in a narrow sense, the fundamental issue is about a sense of empowerment, social equality and effective participation in community life.


Box 5

Overcoming Disability

Mallama from Tallapally village has 5 children. The two older daughters did not go to school and were married young. The third daughter was handicapped and stayed home to look after the two younger siblings. MV Foundation volunteers convinced her to send her handicapped daughter to the bridge camp from where she joined regular school. When she joined school, so did the younger siblings. With information from the volunteers, Mallama managed to get a loan from the Self Help Group for an operation on her daughter's leg when she was in class 7. Her daughter has now completed college and works as a computer operator in a supermarket. Mallama is sure she would have been doing 'coolie' work now if she hadn't been mainstreamed.

7.3 Creating Child Friendly Communities

In reviewing the impact of MVF, it would be appropriate to speak of a change not just of the mindsets of parents, but of a transformation of community culture as a whole. The principles of voluntarism, consensus building, local ownership and universality that are central to MVF's approach have succeeded in galvanizing entire communities, first around the issues of education and child labour and more recently for the protection of the rights of all children. This has led to a transformation of value systems and a change in social behaviour, not just among parents of working children but in the entire community. Norms about child labour, bonded labour, girls' education and child marriage have changed in the space of a few decades. It is not uncommon to find erstwhile employers of children joining in campaigns to eradicate child labour and enrol children in schools. The case of a landlord who was once a leading employer of bonded labour, but now is the chairperson of the local CRPF in Nalgonda district is symptomatic of this change. Another example is provided by Rajitha from Tallapally village in Ranga Reddy District who used to employ a boy as bonded labour to look after her buffaloes. She was convinced



by MVF volunteers to release this boy and allow him to attend school. She sold her buffaloes, sold some agricultural land and took several loans to buy a bus from which she now earns Rs. 40 – 60,000 per month. The boy that she released completed class 9 and is now employed by her as the bus driver!

The impact of MVF on community life can also be gauged statistically through the scale and intensity of new social associations and networks that have been created through the movement, particularly in the process of ensuring its local sustainability via these empowered institutional structures. Over the past decade, the numbers of these support groups, their membership, and their intensity of work have shown a rising trend. Taking the seven types of support groups⁹ together, the total membership in Ranga Reddy in 2009 was 39,054 (possibly with some overlaps); this comes to a density of 39 members in every village over 7 different committees. For Nalgonda, the corresponding numbers are 19,166 members at a density of 42 members per village. In 2009 in Ranga Reddy, these committees, also including parents, held a staggering total of 12,933 meetings, or 13 meetings per year in each village; for Nalgonda, the total was 10,798 meetings, or 24 meetings per year, or one each fortnight. This represents a remarkable degree of mobilization and organization, reflecting a tremendous capacity to monitor and to act proactively and react rapidly as the evolving local process demands. The creation of these new and dynamic forms of social capital constitutes a profound contribution to community life. Entire communities have come to be self-empowered for transformational change and for making their villages child friendly.

The impact on the villages where MVF is working is palpable and visible. Take the case of Mokilla Thanda, which has been transformed beyond recognition in the 19 years since MVF started working there (see Box 6). The material circumstances of families have improved; mud huts have been replaced by *pucca* houses; the streets are clean; most children are in school, and over half of them attend private schools, despite their questionable quality and the extra cost that this entails. The transformation of Mokilla Thanda cannot be ascribed entirely to the MVF programme. Surely, there


⁹ The seven groups include: Male Youth Groups, Girl Youth Groups, CRPFs, Gram Panchayats, BKVV, Mothers/ DWACRA and GRPF.

are other factors at work as well. Tentatively, it is arguable that once children's labour became unavailable, parents were forced to be creative in seeking alternative survival strategies such as crop diversification, tube wells and bargaining for better adult wages that have ultimately worked to their economic advantage and subsequently created the conditions for a wider transformation in the level of development of the village.

Box 6

Mokilla Thanda Village : A transformed Community

The population of Mokilla Thanda village in Ranga Reddy district consists mainly of the Lambada (Scheduled Tribe) community. When MVF first started working here in 1992 only 8 children were in school; child labour was the norm, 18 children worked as bonded labour and there were only two persons in the entire village that had completed school. Most families lived in 'jhompris' (mud houses) and only jowar and toor were grown in the fields. This is a far cry from the Mokilla Thanda of 2009. "The old days are over," says one parent; "our thinking is now different," says another. The change in norms regarding education and child labour is evident from the fact that only 6 or 7 children are out of school from a total school-going age population of 240. 36 children from the village are studying at the graduate and post-graduate levels. Parents express concern at the poor quality of education in the village school and prefer to send their children to live in hostels that enable them access to better government schools. In fact, many parents are now investing in their children's education - 160 children from the village go to private schools in nearby towns and some families have taken the extreme measure of moving out of the village to get a better education for their children. The working children who were mainstreamed into formal education from the bridge camps, now act as role models for others: two of them are police constables, at least 10 shops in the village are owned by them, one owns a lorry, one has become a Congress party 'leader' and one of them is the village Sarpanch. Ramesh, one of the children from the first cohort of bonded labour children that was released in 1992 is clear about what the programme has meant for him: "Without the support of MVF I would have remained in bonded labour. At first I studied from fear of bonded labour, not out of any interest. But education has given me confidence. I have got a B.Ed. degree and am now preparing for the competitive Public Service Commission examination." There is a change in the material circumstances of the families as well. Daily wages have increased - from Rs. 10-15 in 1992 to Rs. 90 - 150. Many families no longer keep goats and agriculture has diversified to include cultivation of chillis, tomatoes, aubergine and even rice. This has been made possible by the introduction of tube wells, which have reduced the earlier dependency on rainwater. Most families now live in 'pucca' houses. Parents still have to work very hard but they are convinced that they want to educate their children. "We will work till we can, then we can always hire labour," says Munni, a mother of school-going children. Ishnabai, a widow who works on daily wages echoes the sentiment: "I don't want my sons to do this work. I want them to study. It doesn't matter if I lose some income now but I have to educate them."



Another external intervention of relevance is the launching of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and its likely impact on local communities and families. A few simple statistics on orders of magnitude could provide some perspective. Applying mandal-level averages derived from up-to-date data for NREGA operations in Andhra Pradesh, to Ranga Reddy District, it can be estimated that an average of 96 households per village obtained 55 days of work each during 2009, and were paid Rs 89 per day, implying total annual household earnings of Rs 4895 per participating household, or Rs 408 per month. How would this compare with the costs of education and the returns to child labour?

First: from MVF data, we know that for 2005-09, there were only 10 non-school going children per village in the Ranga Reddy project area. This implies that, in general, the non-availability of NREGA employment was not a constraint (unless the households with non-school going children did not have adults who could perform manual labour). Second: if the costs of school education were taken at approximately Rs 100 per month per child¹⁰, these would be only a quarter of the additional earnings from NREGA employment for the household, leaving a balance of Rs 308 per month. Third: with reported daily wages of about Rs 40 per day for child labour, this balance would also compensate for 7 days of the child's lost wages each month. These are rough averages, but they do convey the clear conclusion that, in principle, NREGA, even at this early stage of its roll out, provides sufficient financial opportunities for covering most, if not the entire cost to the household of withdrawing children from work, and sending them to school instead.

The salience and implications of NREGA, as a potential “solution”, was raised in a collective meeting with 18 experienced MVF cadre in Nalgonda district. In particular, we were interested in learning whether the presence of NREGA projects facilitated the motivation and mobilization process. The answers were insightful, sharp and clear. It was immediately and generally

¹⁰ This would be about twice the level assumed in the report of the Tendulkar Committee on the setting of the new poverty line.


acknowledged that NREGA has had a very positive impact in the countryside, but it was simultaneously emphasized that this effect was quite independent of any linkage with the issue of child labour: “Child labour is an issue of social norms.” If child labour had been due to economic factors, MVF would have concentrated on enhancing economic flows to parents; but this was not the reality of the problem of child labour, according to the unanimous consensus of the meeting. Indeed, cases were cited where the existence of NREGA had induced or increased the incidence of child labour: children had been found to be working at many NREGA sites. Sometimes they had been given job cards with the wrong age; in other cases, children were replacing their parents on NREGA work sites. It was argued that the fundamental problem lay not in the dearth of economic opportunities for the household, but in the value system in which its decision-making was trapped; and NREGA was not a substitute for that constraint, which was what MVF efforts focused on.

These responses emphasize that simplistic economic thinking needs to be rejected: more work opportunities, whether through NREGA, labour migration, or through micro-credit, could leave the child labour problem untouched, and indeed sometimes intensify it. The key issue was getting parents to imagine and seek different futures for their children and themselves, and then to take the steps towards realizing such outcomes. This is what MVF has achieved in its project areas.

7.4 Enabling Child Participation

The right to participation is one of the central pillars of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), along with the right to survival, development and protection. At present many agencies focus overwhelmingly on assuring the child’s right to participation in a context where they are denied most other rights. Children are called upon to exercise agency and to participate in decision-making on a range of important issues including work, education, health and sexuality. While it is true that the CRC gives children a voice in all matters concerning their lives, before they can exercise choices in a meaningful manner, they need to be





prepared and enabled to take ‘informed’ decisions. The CRC stipulates clearly that child participation has to be in accordance with children’s “evolving capacities” and that there is no “hierarchy of rights” i.e. that all rights have an equal significance.

MVF rightly steers clear of an approach where the right to participation is taken out of context and given primacy above other rights. Instead, all rights are given equal importance and the entire community including children, youth, parents, teachers, and the local government are made aware about child rights and are invited to become partners in the effort to secure all rights for all children in their area. Through this process children become aware of their right to education and protection from child labour, and they can take a stand against parents and employers. Many children defy both parents and employers and run away to join the bridge camps, others pester their parents till they give in and allow them to join school, and girls often refuse to speak or eat to avoid early marriage. Speaking to any group of children who have been through the MVF programme reveals countless examples of such forms of resistance exercised by the children. But this happens in an environment where the children are aware that their attempts to exercise control over their lives will be supported by the MVF staff and volunteers. The achievements of MVF would not have been possible without the active involvement of children and youth but the organisation resists the temptation to focus disproportionately on the single aspect of child participation as it believes that in order to bring about permanent change, the entire community should participate in securing child rights and through this process develop community norms about children and childhood.


7.5 Impact on government and Panchayati Raj Bodies

A central tenet of MVF’s operational philosophy and approach has been that it does not stand in confrontation to the state, but uses its efforts to make the state fulfill its constitutional obligation for the universalisation of education. Therefore, it does not believe in setting up parallel alternative systems for providing education, but in getting the state to improve the provision of education, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, in response

to the quantum leap in the demand for education that is stimulated through the impact of MVF's movement in the villages. The evidence confirming the massive shift on the demand side has been reviewed, and underscores the success of that aspect of the movement. And as the mandate has widened and embraced child rights more holistically, additional demands, beyond supply-side resourcing, have also been routed to the state. However, the responsiveness of the state to these new aspirations, demands and claims to rights and entitlements has been varied, and generally not kept pace with needs. Within this overall assessment, a clear distinction needs to be drawn between the impact of MVF on different levels of government and state bodies, i.e., the local, district, state, and national levels – with the degree of impact and responsiveness diminishing with respect to successively higher echelons of the state.

The impact of MVF at the immediate level of local government, or the local state, has steadily and cumulatively grown to be powerful and profound. The local state could be regarded as comprising the village and district levels of administration and government, incorporating also the influence of local power structures on the functioning of the local state authorities and office bearers, whether civil servants or elected representatives. Since its inception, MVF has through its consensual approach argued with, persuaded and won over the local echelons of government. This has implied not just the lack of opposition that radical movements usually encounter, not a reluctant acquiescence, but progressively an active support and then an implicit partnership in furthering the agenda of child rights, starting with the right to education. From initial acts of episodic support, local government is now becoming part of the institutionalized structures that are facilitating, protecting and monitoring child rights. Panchayat and mandal officials, caste leaders, local religious leaders, employers, landlords, police officers, block and district officials, have increasingly developed a palpable sense of ownership of the programme. Perhaps the local government leaders see advantage in taking part in this initiative in view of its mass popularity – always good in an electoral democracy. All said and done, the MVF intervention has





led to a democratization of the local state with respect to issues concerning child - and increasingly, gender - rights. There are obvious spillover effects of such a change on the quality of local governance.

At the level of the state government, the influence tends to weaken somewhat, though MVF retains a strong voice that is much respected and well heard. State governments can dodge, parry or sidetrack uncomfortable requests and demands through procrastination, lip service, and compromise. Many promises are made that are not kept, and it is logistically and politically difficult for MVF to attempt to mobilize and organize effective movements at this higher level. Thus, while the state government has adopted some of MVF's strategies, it has not responded adequately to the transformational space opened up by MVF at the local level. This is directly visible in the sphere of education. While local stakeholders have combined with local government to work for improved quality of education, this new flood of energy has been met with a sluggish, ineffectual and indifferent response from the state government. As quality improvements have lagged behind the leap in the new demand for education, parents have turned away from the stagnating public school system to private providers, providing a paradoxical and unintended outcome to a movement that has sought tirelessly to strengthen the system of public education. We were informed that as many as 40% of children in Nalgonda and 50% in Ranga Reddy Districts now go to private schools. Obviously, enrolments in government schools are going down as a result. An observer can only express disappointment at the relative lack of response of the Andhra Pradesh government to one of the more innovative and creative social movements of the country.


The impact is further diluted and reified when the focus is shifted to the national level. Perhaps one of the reasons for the lack of take-up at higher levels is that the MVF movement represents a complex struggle, a movement constructed over decades with the investment of vast reservoirs of voluntary energy. It does not provide a unitary silver bullet solution, such as a particular model of micro-credit, or simply handing over cash, or the easy populism of top-

down employment guarantees. There is an increasing official recognition of the high rates of attrition in school education, of the wastage of resources and lives, of the intractability of institutional and behavioural constraints at local levels. And yet, there is far too little recognition, in the form of accepting and resourcing the MVF approach that is lauded for its pioneering achievements precisely in overcoming such barriers. This unsatisfactory outcome needs to be addressed and the communication and registration gaps need to be bridged. There is clearly a role here for MVF itself to think explicitly in terms of influencing strategic policy agendas at the national level.

7.6 Gendering Universality

The general experience of mainstreaming gender concerns within universal development strategies has often led to their de-prioritization, and allowed the realities of gender deficits to mutate and survive in modified forms within the rhetoric of universality. Universal strategies then cannot assume that since rights are declared to be equal for all, they could be claimed equally by all, or that different excluded groups do not have special constraints and needs preventing them from successfully joining the mainstream. Gender exclusion could well be the single most powerful dimension for non-participation in education. A careful scrutiny of MVF's programme reveals that a diversity of powerfully gendered processes and interventions are used. These fall into three broad categories. The first pertains to the core concern of getting all children in the 5-14 age group to school; the second group concerns the gendered interventions that arise from the widening and deepening of the MVF approach to issues concerning children outside these age bands, i.e., dealing with early childhood and with youth dimensions; and a third category comprises responses that are spillover effects of MVF's interventions, being initiatives that are generated by the previous two groups, or independently of them.

MVF's broad definition of child labour – covering all children who are not at school – puts the spotlight directly on home-based



workers which includes a disproportionate proportion of girls held back from school. Through the adoption of this definition, MVF's strategy becomes strongly, rather than weakly, gendered. It deals with all non-school going children, and these ranks are dominated by girls. The drive for universality has progressively drawn MVF into confronting gender-specific constraints, reflecting the pervasive persistence and influence of patriarchal systems and values. Quite early, it became evident that the traditional practice of early child marriage stood in the way of the schooling of girls. Isolated episodes of resistance to child marriage developed into a sustained campaign with the organization regularly tracking girls at the ages when they are vulnerable to early marriages.¹¹

It is now standard operational practice to proactively monitor the situation with regard to child marriages; to identify likely cases where it might occur, and to intervene to prevent these whenever possible. Over the 2005-06 to 2009-10 period, the trends tend to confirm the positive impact of MVF's interventions, with the practice becoming only sporadic in several mandals. Another pattern that the study data reveal is the steady increase in the average age of child marriage between 2000, when it was 8.33 years, and 2006 when it had risen to 14.80 years. This declining trend can be attributed, perhaps to a significant degree, to the impact of the visible, vocal and continuous challenges against this practice by MVF staff and volunteers. Such campaigns, involving a wide array of stakeholders and professionals, are intensified in the marriage season, January to May; one MVF volunteer said that even if they found four relatives of an under-age girl getting together, MVF cadres would swing into action!

¹¹ In order to deepen its own knowledge base on this vital issue, and to lay the foundation for expanding future civic action against the practice, MVF cadres conducted a systematic follow-up survey in April 2006 in nine mandals of Nalgonda district of 70 cases of child marriages that had occurred during the previous 5-6 years in order to identify the subsequent outcomes of such marriages. There are 3 cases of suicides; 19 cases of divorce and separation; 3 cases of abortions; 10 cases of atrocities against child brides; 5 cases of significant health issues; 9 instances of dowry-related problems; and 13 cases of serious marital quarrels. 44 girls had been studying in school at the point of marriage, but in only 5 of the cases had the girl continued to study after getting married.


Four interventions need special mention here. First, the sustained drive for the improvement of school infrastructure, focusing especially on the provision of toilets and running water. This deficit has worked as a major constraint particularly in the case of girls. Second, measures taken to allay concerns over personal security through reliable and safe modes of transportation to senior schools in other villages. Third, drawing on the campaigns against child marriage, the drive to motivate parents not to force their daughters to drop out after class X, but to carry on to a university level. And fourth, the extension in favour of mother and child health programmes in recognition of the fact that gender bias and disadvantage begins before birth and is intensified, with long-term consequences, in the early years of childhood. All these interventions exemplify the strongly gendered nature of the MVF movement and its approach.

The spillover effects of this approach are prominently visible in other areas of struggle for the rights of the girl child. The movement to ensure the fulfillment of the right of girls to education inexorably draws field staff and volunteers into various other struggles pertaining to related, or prior, human rights. For example, in 2006, a case of a 9-year old girl being committed (by her parents and the local mandal president) to the life of a *jogini* was reported in a village in Ranga Reddy district. What followed was a sustained struggle organized by MVF cadres and CRPF committees for the protection of the girl's rights. The persistent and effective mobilization paid off and the outcome was a victory: "from a child issue, the matter seemed to have become a village issue!"¹². This landmark victory is bound to have significant spillover effects and set the framework for overcoming similar cultural and social practices.

Another powerful example of spillover effects is provided by the case of Cheruvumundhali Thanda village in Kulkacherla mandal, where a vigilant local Sarpanch chanced upon a pattern of infant deaths that suggested systematic female infanticide, and took his concern to the CRPF Convener. Eleven recent cases of

¹² Annual Report, May 2005 – April 2006; p. 14.





unexplained child deaths were identified - all involving girls. An intensive campaign ensued, spread across 79 *thandas*; mandal level meetings were attended by over 1000 persons and involving the presence and active support of district level education officials, the labour department, ICDS, the district medical and health office, the department of women and child development, and organizers from all the mandals of the district. New systems of monitoring were identified, and commitments were made by government to set up additional anganwadis.¹³

While the *jogini* and the infanticide episodes refer to low frequency occurrences, the practice of domestic violence is endemic and all too often a daily occurrence. MVF's attention was especially drawn to this issue when surveys conducted to identify the circumstances of difficult-to-reach children revealed that a significant section came from broken families.¹⁴ MVF practice is to resolve marital issues, whenever possible, through consultation and persuasion, involving relatives and the local community as necessary, often with a prominent role for the Sarpanches of the villages of the wife and the husband. It was reported that over 2007-2009, more than 3000 separated families had been reunited via the mediation efforts of MVF.

The overwhelming conclusion that emerges is that the MVF movement and programmes are powerfully gendered. What is especially striking is that significantly positive gender outcomes have been achieved through struggles and institutionalisation that does not isolate gender issues from the wider social fabric within which these are embedded. While there are indeed some specific girls or women's committees to deal with specific issues, for the larger part, the human rights of girls and women have been secured through processes that are universal, and mainstreamed.

¹³ Details of the episode and the response are provided in Annual Report, January – December 2007, p.25.


¹⁴ Regular monitoring is done of all married women below the age of 35, with a distinction made between those below 18 years and the rest. Six aspects are recorded: the incidence of marriage within the family (i.e., with uncles and cousins); child mortality; prevalence of disability; the incidence of abortions; reproductive health problems; and domestic violence.

7.7 Tracking the Journey: MVF's Impressive Data Collection Systems

MVF's mode of functioning calls for the investment of huge flows of organizational energy into each step of the process, interactively engaging the full range of stakeholders involved. MVF cadres have accumulated impressive experience and skills for these tasks, reflecting their deep commitment to their self-adopted social mandate. To make this collective energy effective, it has to be directed accurately to the key points where it is necessary. And to spotlight these key points, it is necessary to develop a reliable, comprehensive and readily usable database for accurately identifying the weak links in the full educational chain on a continuous basis.

The core of the statistical system focuses on tracking each child in MVF's operational areas. In each village, a census is conducted of all families and data are collected on each child in the 5-14 year age group. In specific, information is gathered on the child's educational status and work profile. It becomes possible to locate every child, whether in the village school, or in a school or bridging facility outside the village, or as a worker at home or in a worksite; the number of non-school going children is established, and also the specifics of the past educational profile of such working children, i.e., the class from which they dropped out, or if they never enrolled for school at all. Details of the work activities of working children, and of bonded child labour are also revealed, and all relevant information on the household members are noted. This allows MVF to establish the ground realities with regard to gaps in educational enrolment and retention for all boys and girls in the 5-14 age group.

The household-level information from such village censuses are supplemented by comprehensive data collection at the school level. For each school, up-to-date statistics are gathered for each class covering children resident in the reference village as well as those coming from neighbouring villages; all cases of new enrolments whether through regular direct entry, or via the RBCs and Motivation Centres; individual-level information is collected



on a monthly basis on all cases of long absentees (defined as children not attending class for longer than 7-10 days) in each class in each school.

These two databases allow MVF to focus on three key points of vulnerability. First, they can identify and follow up on each non-school going child in the full school-going age range, separately for child labourers, for bonded children; and they can track the presence and progress of all children that have entered the residential bridge courses prior to being mainstreamed into the age-appropriate class in a regular school. Second, they can identify children who are at risk of dropping out by quickly and accurately capturing episodes of long absenteeism (the first indication of eventually dropping out); and each such case is rapidly followed up with the family of the child concerned. And third, MVF can focus on the outcome of annual exams, the crunch point in the transition of cohorts from one school year to the next, and from one schooling level to the next. Data are gathered for each annual exam of each class to track those that passed, those that failed but stayed enrolled, those that did not take the exam, and those that did not register in the next class. Again, individual-specific follow-up occurs for all children who do not remain registered. It is through actions such as these that MVF minimizes the rate of dropouts during the schooling process. Clearly there is many a slip between enrolment and completion; and this is where MVF's interventions make a telling difference.


MVF has also devised operational techniques and instruments, and embedded these in institutionalized monitoring processes at local level, for the purpose of identifying and responding to issues of educational quality. For this purpose, quality is construed in terms of a wide array of features, which holistically define the child's experience of schooling. This includes dimensions of the learning process itself; an array of crucial infrastructural indicators that capture deficits in basic school facilities; and teacher performance and behaviour. In consultation with stakeholders, a template of 20 key indicators has been developed in terms of which all schools are regularly monitored in joint problem-recognition

and action-oriented meetings involving teachers, principals, parents, and panchayat officials. This template is locally fine tuned periodically, with the addition and/or replacement of some indicators, as in the case of Nalgonda district, where an additional 5 points were added to its own adopted version. Data are regularly gathered, and meetings to consider problem areas and appropriate action take place on a fortnightly or monthly basis.

The significance of the statistical instruments used by MVF cannot be overstated. They focus attention, in the first instance, on data gathering. This allows problems to be identified, leading subsequently to a joint recognition and acceptance of the issues by the key stakeholders involved (especially those whose behaviour, attitudes or (in)actions contribute to the problem in the first instance), which then leads to collective remedial action plans and assigned responsibilities, which in turn, lead to specific desired outcomes which are then monitored and fed back into the process. The two illustrations used above viz., tracking the child's passage through schooling and monitoring the quality of the school education process, are central to MVF functioning, but they are far from being exhaustive. Through its daily work and wide interface of engagement with the constraints faced by children, new issues emerge organically and new lines of enquiry and work arise, with new demands for needs assessments, calling for corresponding fresh data for problem-specification as well as subsequent monitoring and self-evaluation of MVF interventions. Tracking children in the 0-5 age group, and the systematic collection of data on child marriage at the village level, are two examples of such new initiatives (discussed separately in this report).

Local data are generated and used operationally on a continuous basis, contributing critically to the effectiveness of local initiatives and interventions. The contrast with national and international systems of data collection could not be greater. MVF has pioneered these techniques; its system works, and needs to be appropriately up-scaled to a national level.

What is worth emphasizing is that the data gathering exercise for monitoring is not of an *ad hoc*, partial, occasional or idiosyncratic



nature where checks are sometimes made on specific groups of children in high profile cases for generating the odd media report. Rather, it is a meticulous, continuous and comprehensive systemic feature that guide's MVF's operational work on a daily basis. In 1991, MVF was active in 3 villages and mainstreamed 30 children; at that stage, such a comprehensive data system was hardly necessary. In 2009, it is active in 6 districts in Andhra Pradesh and in five other states in India; it covers around 2500 villages in Andhra Pradesh alone, and links with over half a million children on a daily basis. The scale of effort required in developing and maintaining meaningful, accurate and usable data systems that can guide such live operations is massive, but so are the returns.

In this discussion, the creation and use of data systems has been highlighted. But this is not an activity in itself. Accurate and meaningful data lead MVF to the door of the family, or the classroom, or the government office, where a constraint or problem resides; that is where the narrative passes to the next chapter, where the story of MVF facilitation and problem-solving begins.


7.8 MVF Resource Persons: A Moving Force

If one thinks of MVF as an engine driving a process of social change, its resource persons would be the dynamo. “Resource persons” are not recruited by advertisement, but are created organically from within. It is their immersion in the movement, combined with their personal commitment, abilities, discipline and perseverance, that converts them into powerful strategists and tacticians, energizers and organizers. They develop capacities that are fungible, in that they can be brought to bear on divergent special issues within MVF operations, or on the overall direction of the movement. Resource persons are equally skilled at committees as at campaigns; at interacting with parents, or the police, or provincial officials. They constitute the core of the force for social transformation. As a collectivity, they represent the single most valuable asset of the MVF movement. The twenty-year engagement of MVF in this field has developed a chain of successive cohorts of such resource persons.

Their potential worth is greatly enhanced by this fungibility, not just in terms of tasks, but also in terms of their ability to serve as carriers and conveyers of MVF's operational philosophy to other regions and states. As such they become transplanting agents, initiating, catalyzing, directing and backstopping MVF-cloned initiatives in environments where the deficits and problems of education are massive, and local responses and solutions non-existent or ineffectual. The value of their contributions is evidenced in the concrete achievements and outcomes in several other states that have invited MVF to facilitate in getting their educational efforts off the ground. Viewed thus, these resource persons collectively act as virtual substitutes, or proxies, for a missing movement – compensating for and bypassing various institutional constraints in the host environments. A crucial part of this process of diffusion is the development of local institutional capacities to act independently as rapidly and effectively as possible. But such processes cannot be short-circuited at will; human, social and institutional capital takes time to construct and consolidate. The widely scattered coordinates of the MVF's resource persons across Andhra Pradesh and other parts of the country provide a mapping of their contributions – customized to the specific requirements of each location and environment. They constitute a valuable asset that needs to be nurtured, developed and utilized.

7.9 Institutionalization and Sustainability: How Secure is It?

There is incontrovertible evidence, much of it cited earlier, to confirm that the MVF movement has gained powerful momentum in its operational areas in Andhra Pradesh, and indeed also in several of the other states where the approach has been welcomed and diffused, usually through the agency of MVF resource persons. Inevitably, different locations display divergent levels of capacity, attainment and maturity. Various institutional innovations that occurred and evolved sequentially in the core sites are now being rolled out simultaneously from the very first stages of the change process. A detailed discussion was provided in Section 5 on the steps that have been taken to institutionalize the programme. A fundamental question that arises, as in the case of all such civic-



led interventions, is the issue of sustainability of these interventions. Is the sustainability of the movement contingent on the continual involvement of the pioneering external agency? If that is so, it could not be regarded as sustainability in intrinsic terms. For that to occur, the helping hand, the crutches, the guiding power has to be withdrawn. There is often an inability, perhaps even unwillingness, on the part of the external agency to lay down the foundations to expedite their own withdrawal; somehow, the objectives of the sustainability of the movement and the sustainability of the organization tend to get symbiotically and perversely intertwined. In general, there is a need for acute vigilance against this regressive tendency, which would undermine the fundamental objectives of developing longer-term sustainability with autonomy and independence.

In order to assess progress in this regard, it is generally necessary to go beyond declarations of intent and to scrutinize and identify precisely how the organizational strategy constructs long-term sustainability. In other words, how has the organization built the conditions for ensuring its own redundancy and withdrawal? A careful review confirms this exceptional feature of the MVF movement. From the outset, it has attempted to design, dynamise and embed processes and institutional structures that enhance local capacities for independent action. This progressive process of local enablement, and its manifest outcomes, is widely recognizable in all its areas of operation. Long-term sustainability has clearly been thought out carefully, been translated into operational strategies, and been implemented and developed from the outset everywhere; people are being taught how to fish, not just being given fish. This is clear.


What is equally clear is that this vital process is at very different stages in different locations. It might be close to full maturity in some core areas, but is obviously at intermediate, or even incipient stages in other locations. As such, the presence of MVF remains a vital, indispensable necessity in many of its areas of operation, particularly the new areas of diffusion in other districts and states. Here, the process is well launched, but still in its crucial formative

and development stages and far from attaining maturity. A premature stoppage and withdrawal of the programme would almost inevitably have a powerful negative effect. For those mandals and villages where the process is at intermediate stages, any such withdrawal would jeopardize and erode the gains already achieved, while undermining realistic possibilities of the change processes being carried forward effectively to full maturity. These sentiments were repeated frequently and clearly in the field in response to hypothetical questions from us about such a scenario. "We can do most of the work ourselves now but we need MVF to give us direction and provide us with information, data and training," is a composite expression of the views that we heard.

Even in the core areas where the movement can make legitimate claims to have reached a stage of institutionalized sustainability, it could be argued that a sudden withdrawal of MVFs presence could induce the serious risk of an unravelling of past gains. Societal evolution is a continual process; struggles for specific changes can accomplish their goals, but then the ground gained has to be held against reversals and counteracting tendencies of various kinds. Just as mind sets and patterns of social behaviour can be transformed in a progressive direction, so also can they revert to earlier patterns under the influence of new negative forces. The case of socialist China provides a dramatic illustration of how profound changes in community and societal norms made over two generations could be dramatically reversed, and old regressive patterns of aspirations and behaviour restored in the space of a decade. A case is not being made here for the presence of MVF in the field in perpetuity. But a premature withdrawal would almost definitely have deleterious impacts in virtually all its working areas.

A closer comparison with Kerala might also be insightful. Here, the social movements and other political struggles that formed the driving force behind Kerala's profound transformation in terms of human development, especially gender related dimensions, had deep, complex and intertwining roots in history. Subsequently, many of the key humanist and universalist aspirations of the early social movements were translated into political agendas that were





successfully established and embedded in official policy frameworks by governments that drew their mandate and support from the working and poorer sections of Kerala society. The intense and widespread degree of political mobilization and organization has come to be reflected in vigilant, capable and active local governments, which ensure that the earlier gains are not eroded and new needs are identified and addressed. Andhra Pradesh has a different history, characterized more by differences than similarities from Kerala and there are massive gaps to be bridged here, as indeed elsewhere in the country. MVF is a crucial change agent in this challenged environment, and its continued presence and role remains critical to ensuring the rootedness of its pioneering model, both in Andhra Pradesh and via its diffusion strategies, to other parts of the country.




8

RECOMMENDATIONS

MVF is at a crucial juncture in its organizational history where it is poised to make important decisions about future directions and strategies. The following recommendations are intended to contribute to the ongoing internal debate as well as trigger off some new areas for discussion. Since most of the recommendations made below have resource implications, they are intended as a pointer to potential donors as well.

1. MVF has developed a powerful model for ensuring the universalisation of education and eradication of child labour in its home base in Andhra Pradesh. It has demonstrated that this model can be successfully transplanted outside the state in varied locations and contexts. It is initiatives such as these that will be crucial in enabling the country to reach the goal of universal education. The task that MVF has undertaken in Ranga Reddy and Nalgonda districts in Andhra Pradesh, and in other states as a part of its dissemination efforts, needs to be strengthened and intensified. International NGOs would also stand to benefit from in-depth exposure to the MVF programme - through field visits to Andhra Pradesh and by inviting MVF resource persons to provide technical expertise. Efforts to increase the visibility of MVF's approach need to be supported and stepped up.
2. The MVF cadre of resource persons constitutes a vital link in MVF's dissemination programme. They are a valuable resource that needs to be further developed, nurtured and deployed to full effect. However, the ground realities and constraints of resources would appear to be pushing in the opposite direction. There is a grave risk that inertia or




indifference on the part of the donor community could place at risk the entire body of this powerful, accumulated capacity for motivating, mobilizing, catalyzing and organizing for social transformation. Should such apprehensions be realized, there would be a monumental loss of accumulated value, as the resource persons move into other life paths and careers. The organizational vacuum could be impossible to fill at some later point when funding might come on line again. The key to maintaining the capacity and value of this force is its continuous use and development. Stopping is a virtual guarantee of attrition, dissipation and dissolution. It is vital that this does not come to pass.

3. Much is widely known about MVF's powerful mobilization techniques and school-retention strategies – now widely disseminated and replicated by others, including the government. However, these remain the tip of the iceberg and there is insufficient awareness of the depth of silent, systemic efforts that provide the foundations for the highly visible success stories of the movement. MVF has developed an impressive system of local data generation that contributes significantly to the effectiveness of its local initiatives and interventions. Developing and using such databanks is intrinsically interlinked with operational functioning. The data collection techniques pioneered by MVF need to be up-scaled to a national and international level through dissemination to NGOs and government agencies.
4. While the internal generation and use of data for operational purposes is very impressive, it might be useful, for purposes of comparative performance evaluation, to create a basic set of statistics and indicators on key variables that permit a direct comparison of the situation in the villages and mandals where MVF functions, with the situation prevailing in other mandals, districts, and finally with the state as a whole. Such data would need to be based on identical or equivalent methodologies to permit legitimate comparison. For instance, how much better has, say, Shankarpally Mandal done when


compares it with other non-MVF mandals in Ranga Reddy district, or with other districts, or Andhra Pradesh as a whole? Comparisons could be made with regard to: the creation of school level physical infrastructure; the incidence of child marriages; the rates of dropouts by stages, including those for SC and ST children; and for other key variables where feasible. This could yield useful insights into the scale of impact of MVF activities in its operational areas.

5. MVF should step up efforts to disseminate its approach to a wider audience through its website, documentation and audio-visual materials. The website needs to be upgraded to make it more attractive and interactive and to work as an information resource, providing a full listing of publications, newspaper articles and other relevant information, with links and possibilities for downloading materials. This would be a powerful avenue for dissemination to agencies that are unable to visit Andhra Pradesh but are keen, nonetheless, to gain an understanding of the workings of MVF. Both written and audio-visual documentation about the programme needs to be updated to reflect new developments and the expanded mandate that has been adopted by the organization.
6. The powerful and original 'non-negotiable' principles have stood MVF in good stead in the first phase of the movement, providing a rallying cry, a clear focus and well defined objectives. The unwavering stand that MVF has taken on its definition of child labour and inclusive approach have been responsible, in great part, for the success of the programme in reaching hitherto disregarded targets and mobilizing entire communities around the issues of child labour and education. Any watering down of the 'non-negotiables' at that stage would have weakened the objective of universal coverage and led to a loss of direction. However, the movement is consolidating and taking on a broader range of child rights, requiring the organization to reflect on the 'non-negotiables' and consider revising them so that they are a more accurate representation of the wider tasks undertaken by the organisation at present.

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7. There is a need to address the ambivalent attitudes of a variety of overlapping epistemic communities, each with its own self-prescribed ideological hesitations, to the general MVF approach. Thus, the national government and some international agencies could feel a little exposed in the light of MVF's unequivocal stand on child labour; gender groups might be ambivalent since MVF follows a universal strategy of mainstreaming to address gender human rights; minority groups seeking affirmative action programmes might also find the universal approach an exercise in denial since it eschews trading in terms of reservations and quotas; and national planners working with BPL targets might be puzzled by the MVF rejection of the poverty argument and its emphasis on transforming mind sets and entrenched patterns of social biases and behaviour. MVF has been creative and effective in dissolving such filters and boundaries at the local level through continual interaction and exchange, but such channels of direct engagement do not exist at higher levels where alternative modes of debate, validation and persuasion are relevant. MVF has organically developed supreme skills in the former, but has perhaps engaged insufficiently at the higher levels to achieve correspondingly effective capabilities for advocacy.
 8. MVF's message is compelling in its simplicity but also challenging, in that it calls for a fundamental shift of mindsets and in the intervention strategies of various stakeholders and potential partners. Meeting this challenge would pay rich dividends. The core of such an effort might be a drive to convey to these communities the holistic child-rights driven perspective of the second phase of the MVF model.
 9. MVF should stimulate and encourage research to quantify the impact of its programme. The enormous database available with the organization could be used for this purpose.
 10. The institutionalization process that MVF has undertaken is midstream and in full swing at present. It is a strategy calling for a high degree of intensity and continuity of efforts – at

this point, one cannot see any substitute for it. In the longer run, the objective is for the lowest bodies of government and the local community to take over the ownership and management of the process, and for the system to run itself satisfactorily without the catalyzing, backstopping and monitoring roles that MVF currently performs. The current situation has not yet approached such a level of maturity and the presence of MVF cadres remains critical to the successful institutional rooting of this process. If it is stopped at this stage, some of the gains made so far could be seriously jeopardized. The only responsible option, therefore, is to forge forward. In fact, the need is for a further systematic roll out of the movement; withdrawal will only lead to a roll back, and expose the cumulative gains of a generation of effort to serious attrition, to be significantly eroded and washed away. Both government and donors need to recognise and heed the need for continued institutional and financial support for MVF.

11. MVF's tackling of gender issues and the increased involvement of girls and women deserve to be applauded. The process needs to be continued and in fact to be intensified so it doesn't slip back. Patriarchal values are deeply ingrained in society and can easily resurface and come back with a vengeance, as is evidenced by the rise in honour killings in several cultures, communities and countries, and by the resurgence of patriarchal biases in China.
12. MVF could seek resources to start a new fundraising campaign, employing different strategies and aimed at a new set of donors. There is a need to be creative and think outside the box. The suggestion to intensify local fundraising was made in an earlier evaluation. MVF could also consider forming a group of well-wishers who could take on the task of fundraising on a voluntary basis, independently of MVF. It could also make a systematic attempt to approach a new group of donors that focus on rights based approaches, early childhood dimensions and gender issues.

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13. The widening interface of the MVF movement has implications for the capacity of the organization and a corresponding calling for new skills and capacities from its staff. MVF recognizes the challenge and has been able to reorient the organization but it needs more resources to continue this complex process while retaining its core strengths and values. This implies that MVF staff should be able to pass through a revolving door that allows them to systematically reflect, reorient and retrain themselves for the new challenges that come up from dealing with a broader set of child rights for the 0 – 18 age group. There is an urgent need for the development and resourcing of such internal capacity enhancement programmes for MVF cadres and staff. This is a fresh challenge confronting MVF, arising from its own success.




9

A FINAL REFLECTION

A final reflection is offered for focusing the minds of decision-makers of various donor agencies that have so worthily supported the MVF movement thus far.

For 2009, MVF activities in both Ranga Reddy and Nalgonda districts, embraced a total of 267,617 children. For the same year, the total funding for MVF amounted to Rs. 9,13,46,700. This amounts to Rs. 341 per child, or less than Re. 1/- per child, per day!

How far does this princely outlay of One Rupee travel? What does it deliver? Of course, the economic money-metric, or conventional cost-benefit approaches break down in the evaluation of such movements of social transformation. What value should be placed on hundreds of young lives freed from a lifetime of bonded labour? Or a similar number of minor girls saved from the tradition of child marriage? What value might be placed on fighting antediluvian practices such as *jogini*, or nefarious modern mutations of the traditional practice of female infanticide? What of preventing domestic violence, and thereby reuniting hundreds of broken families; or getting girls to postpone marriage and to study for professional careers after completing Class X; or enabling women to achieve better nutritional and maternity outcomes? What value on improving the quality of education, on doing away with corporal punishment and restoring mutual respect in learning processes? Indeed, not everything that matters can be counted. But that said, it is still possible to link the expenditure on MVF to some measureable outcomes. It could be fairly argued that the dropping out of a child from school implies a waste of the cumulative past investment made in that child's schooling up to that point.



MVF's demonstrated success in achieving full enrolments with full retention then serves as a quantifiable measure of the phenomenal saving of past resources invested in the schooling process that regularly went to waste in earlier years.

What is more, that one rupee leverages in a prodigious volume of uncosted counterpart contributions. These take the form of the commitment, dedication and sacrifice of thousands of active volunteers and silent partners in the field who devote significant fractions of their lifetime, without public recognition or personal monetary reward, to the achievement of the shared goals and aspirations of changing the lives of children for the better.

All for an investment of Re 1/- per child per day! What more could any donor want?

