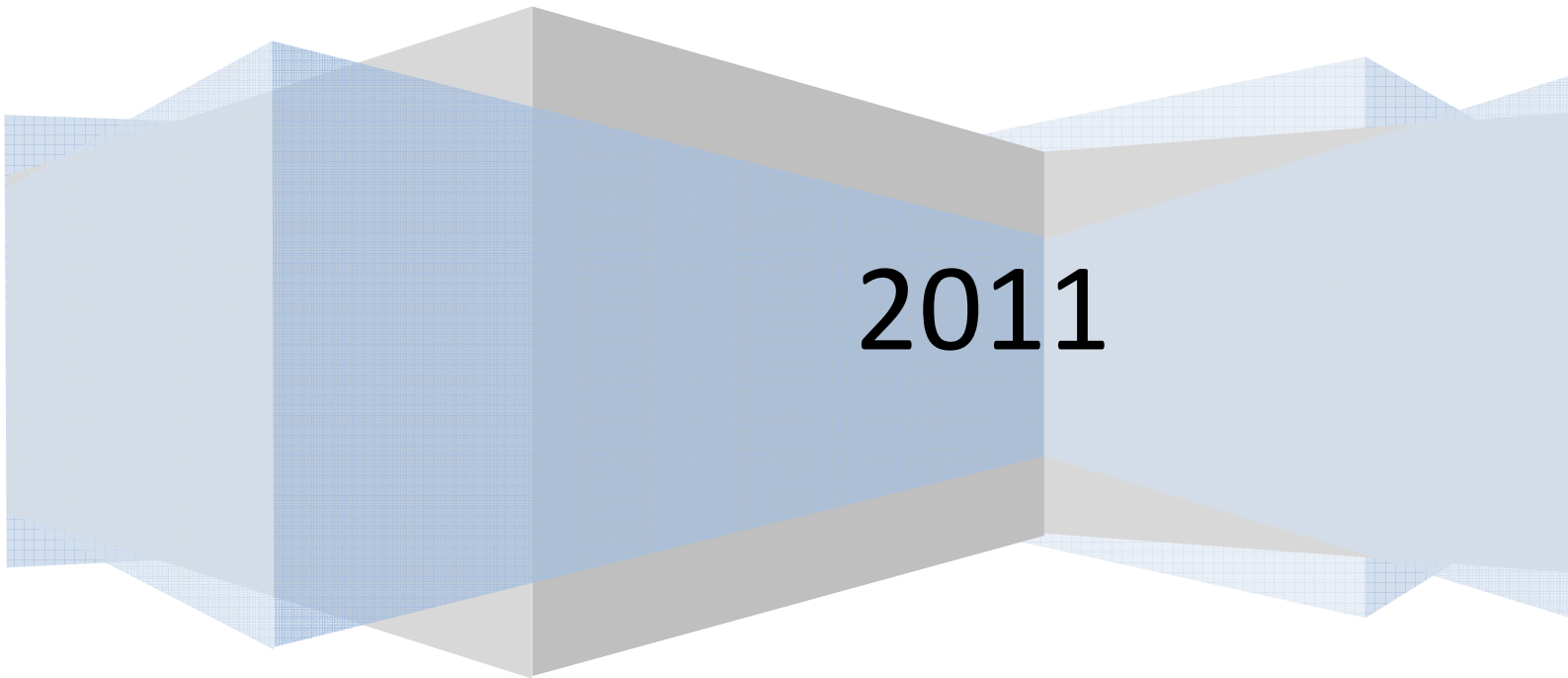


State - NGO Partnership for Bringing the Child Back In-

The M.V. Foundation in Bihar.

Manisha Priyam



2011

State - NGO Partnership for Bringing the Child Back In: The M.V. Foundation in Bihar.

Introduction

- 1.1 This report has been written on the basis of a review of the work of the M.V. Foundation (MVF) with the children of Bihar since the year 2007. The work of the M.V. Foundation was funded by donors SKN from Netherlands and the Bihar Education Project under the Department of Education, Government of Bihar, provided the platform for the work of the M.V. Foundation. The author interacted with MVF workers in Bihar, Panchayat leaders, Residential Bridge Course (RBC) instructors, policy makers from the Education Department and the Panchayati raj Department of the Government of Bihar, and personnel from the education NGO -PRATHAM working in Bihar in the state headquarter of Patna. A field trip was made to district Vaishali where the author interacted with children and instructors of Residential Bridge Courses, sub-district officers of the Education department, Panchayat representatives and parents, specially women. The interactions in the state headquarter and the field trip was conducted in the month of January, 2010. A meeting was also held with the Chairperson of the NCPCR, Prof. Shantha Sinha in New Delhi in May 2010.
- 1.2 The M.V. Foundation work in the state is a part of the foundation's scaling-up efforts of its rich community and institutional interventions in the state of Andhra Pradesh. In Andhra the Foundation has worked over the years to eliminate child labour. In its evolved philosophy, every child out of school is considered a child labour. The realization of his or her rights is crucially dependent on participation in schools. The MVF members have worked on extensive persuasion of the employers of child labour and parents to send the children to school.¹ At the same time, the Foundation has worked on the micro-architecture of schooling policies, and has lobbied hard in changing the nature of such policies which work as a hindrance and effectively exclude children from school. In the long run, the MVF believes that extensive community mobilization leading to the formation of community level bodies such as the Child Rights Protection Forum (CRPF), will work to protect the rights of children on a sustained basis.
- 1.3 The SKN-funded MVF intervention in Bihar allowed the NGO to reach out to one of the most deprived set of children on a national scale, and test its strategies outside the state. There are two novel elements of a general import of this intervention. First, bringing the children back in one of the most needy areas of the country by effectively supporting state government efforts through alternate strategies, is a unique initiative in Government-NGO partnership for achieving shared objectives. The MVF does not, and did not in the Bihar intervention, see its role as

¹ Landlords, cotton farmers, hotel owners, stone quarry contractors are some examples of employers engaging child labour.

replacing government efforts. Instead, it sought to partner with the government and work where the gaps were the most. Second, NGO efforts are widely perceived to be “small” and “local” efforts that may not sustain reaching out on scale to children all over the country. The Bihar initiative allowed the MVF to precisely alter this perception in a very effective way. If the MVF succeeds in Bihar, there is the possibility of having a replicable model that can be put to work in other laggard regions of the country. It is notable that the MVF has indeed overcome barriers of language and region in the course of its work in Bihar.

The Context of children and School in Bihar

2.1 Bihar presents special challenges to the issue of schooling for India’s children and the realization of child rights. The state ranks the lowest amongst all the major states of the country in literacy rates--47% and this is lower by nearly 20 percentage points from the national average of 67 % as per the 2001 Census. While the literacy rates reported in the latest Census of the country in 2011 confirms an increase of nearly seven percentage points over the 2001 level-63.8%, Bihar still remains the country’s least literate state. Further, between 2001- and 2011, the state has narrowed the gap between average literacy rates for Bihar and for India. This is an improvement over the previous decade 1991-2001, where Bihar was noted to be the only state where the gap from the national average has increased in the decennial census 1991-2001. All other states previously below the national average have shown catch-up efforts in this time period.

For the children of the state, educational deprivation is especially acute. While government statistics report high enrollment rates, these are not adjusted for age, and noted to have reporting errors as well. Further, real attendance in schools, as different from mere enrollment, is abysmally low. Table 1 below shows attendance rates in the state, reported by a national level household survey². It is demonstrative of the situation in the state when the MVF decided to work with the government.

Table 1. Attendance Rates, Primary Stage, 2004-05			
	Male	Female	Total
Bihar	72.33	62.72	67.99
All India	88.72	84.99	86.95

Note: Attendance rate is the ratio of children currently reported as attending school, divided by child population in the age group 6-10, expressed as %.

Source: National Sample Survey, 61st round

2.2 The National Sample Survey (NSS), a robust data-base of country-wide household surveys, reports a high percentage of children currently not attending school in the state in the tender age of 6-10 years, nearly one-third of the children in that age-group. Further, there is exclusion in school participation on the basis of caste and gender. Table 1 shows a very high gender gap of 10% in primary school attendance (lower for girls). Exclusion from schools based on the social category of caste is also very high. The lowest school participation is noted for the scheduled

²²² 61st round of National Sample Survey held in 2004-05.

castes, which are at the lowest end of the caste hierarchy in India. The scheduled caste-girl child from rural Bihar is the most deprived, with a very low attendance ratio of 45 %, evident from Table 2 below. Bihar stands out with a very high proportion of 30% of primary school age children who have never attended school. This acute deprivation notwithstanding, the demand for schooling is very high in the state. This is evident in the fact that the state reports a very low drop-out for children, i.e. children leaving school after having joined -1% in NSSO 61st round. This indicates that children who ever get an opportunity to join the schooling system, stayed on. The onus clearly was on the state to provide for schools for its underprivileged children.

Table 2. Primary Stage Attendance by Social caste, Rural Bihar.

2004-05	SC	OBC	Others	Total
Male	58%	74%	83%	72%
Female	45%	64%	75%	61%
Total	52%	70%	79%	67%

Source: National Sample Survey, 61st round

2.3 The state is also an outlier in terms of the incidence of poverty, with almost 40% of its population below the officially declared poverty line for the country. The incidence of poverty is even higher for rural areas. Stagnant and low per-capita incomes are evidence to the fact that the poor of the state have been unable to participate in the gains of the high rates of economic growth witnessed elsewhere in the country since economic liberalisation policies were ushered in the early 90's.

2.4 What makes the situation specially challenging for state as well as non-state interventions in education is the chronic weakness of institutions, almost a breakdown. Plagued by very high pupil-teacher ratios, close to 70(pupils): 1(teacher), no teacher recruitments were made for over a decade until 2006 due to policy gaps. Future hiring of good human resource is made even more difficult by the fact that teacher-training institutions do not exist in the state. The district and sub-district school- administration are not engaged in school renewal activities and are not accessible to people. Despite a long-term donor support for the education sector for over two decades, first from the UNICEF for the Bihar Education Project, and then from the World Bank as well for the District Primary Education Programme and then the Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan, things hardly improved.

M V Foundation comes to Bihar

3.1 What brought the MVF to Bihar was a convergence of internal demand from the state, desire of MVF to expand, and donor interest from SKN. In 2005, there was a new government in Bihar which took on the agenda of school-education reform on a high priority. Getting out of school children into schools was high on the policy-priority. The administration committed itself to prioritising

bringing the girl child and the social caste of *Musahars*³ into schools. The then Education Secretary, late Mr. M.M. Jha visited the MVF in Andhra Pradesh, and there-after invited MVF to work in Bihar.

3.2 Under the Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan the state launched new programmes for the girl child and the for the sub-caste category of *Mahadalits*⁴ of which the Musahars were a part. Among the new focused interventions for the Mahadalits were programmes on alternative education in Bihar, including RBCs , *Sankalp*, and *Utthan for Mahadalits*.

3.3 For the MVF, it was an opportunity to test its working strategies, and thereby its philosophy towards the child. While the Bihar situation was unique in that deprivations were acute and indeed caste-based, the Foundation saw it as one more instance of the challenge of “bringing the last child into school.” As Shantha put it, “While people talk about how to get the Musahars to school, the MVF looks at it as an issue of not the Musahar alone, but of the whole village. Do not treat the child as a Musahar but as a child. Do not communalise and fragment the child. Get people to come together on the secular agenda of the child.”⁵ It was possible to build alliances and work across parochial identities once the child was the centre.

3.4 The donor funding from SKN, was very significant as it gave MV Foundation the necessary autonomy from state-government officials in terms of funding. While they worked in synergy with the government, MVF volunteers did not have to run around government officials for salaries and clearances. They were also perceived by the people as independent of the District level “official”.

3.5 One other element of support for the MVF in the local environment of Bihar, was that of the established role of the social-activist in the state. This was so because of a long history of mobilization in the state under the Jay Prakash Narayan⁶ led political movement, and then the Bihar Education Project (BEP). The BEP recognized this and placed a strong emphasis on community mobilization if basic education was to be achieved in the state. Because of the tradition of the JP movement and the BEP as a programme, the People of the state took on easily to the idea of an activist -in this case the MVF volunteers who linked the household to the Residential Bridge Course (RBC).

MVF on the Ground: Expanding the Charter.

4.1 The MVF began its work in the year 2007 starting with seven districts of Bihar where the Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan had the *Sankalp* programme running. At the time of the evaluation, the area had expanded, and MVF was working in twelve districts. The core elements of the MVF intervention were identifying children who were not in school, putting them in short-duration residential bridge courses to cover the ‘learning gap’, and finally, putting them back in appropriate grades in

³ Musahars are amongst the lowest caste on the social hierarchy. The name suggests them to be rat eaters.

⁴ The concept of Mahadalits refers to most backward castes among the scheduled castes, and is intended to focus welfare activities on this difficult to reach group.

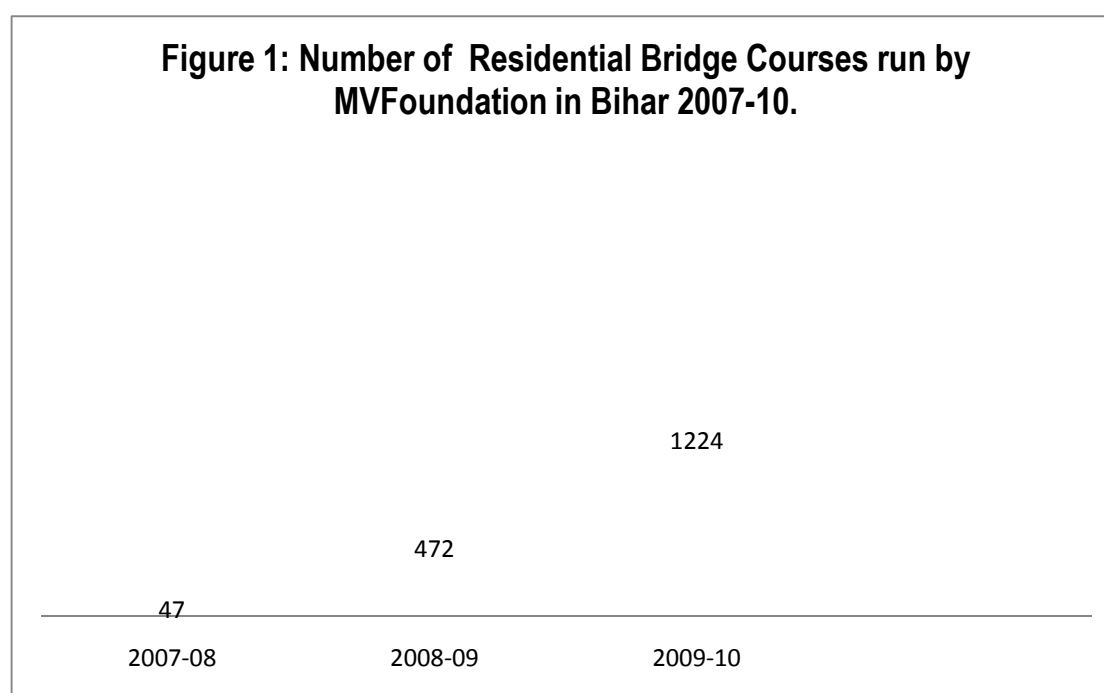
⁵ Interview with Shantha Sinha at Moti Bagh New Delhi, May 2, 2010. She is currently the Chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. She is a founder Member of the MVF and has served as its Secretary .

⁶ Popularly known as ‘JP’, he led a student’s agitation corruption and against the emergency imposed by the Congress in 1975.

government schools. This approach reaffirmed MVF's philosophy of supplementing and not substituting state efforts.

4.2 To achieve these objectives, the Foundation had a very innovative organizational structure with a clear focus on spreading out in the field. The structure was very lean at the top, and networked with the community at the bottom. The typical structure of functionaries provided by the MVF included one district level resource person, one-in charge for the sub-district block, and then six *karyakartas* or volunteers for working at the panchayat level. Beginning from 150 volunteers in 2007, the MVF today have 1200 volunteers enlisted for the cause, making it the biggest non-government initiative of this kind.

4.3 At the heart of the MVF intervention was the model of the 'residential bridge course', the RBCs as they were commonly referred to. The RBCs were an innovation introduced to Bihar from MVF's experience of work in Andhra Pradesh. The starting point of the RBC was the thought that children left out of school should not be given an 'alternative' or 'non-formal education' in a tier-two system. The non-formal education centres were run in the evenings, through low-paid volunteers, and did not in any way complete the experience of schooling for children. All children were entitled to school, and the institutional support should have been provided to them to facilitate their entry in school, rather than send them to informal teaching shops. The RBCs provided short-term residential courses to identified, out of school children, making them competent for lateral entry to schools. The commitment to stay in a hostel to be able to go to school in the future also prepared the families of such children about the importance of sending their ward to school.



Source: MV Foundation, Bihar head office.

4.4 In terms of numbers figure 1 shows that when the MVF began, in 2007-08, it was running 47 RBCs. By the next year it had expanded ten-fold, and in 2008-09 it was running 472 centres. By 2009-10 it was running 1224 centres, and had placed almost 67,000 children back in school. Further, the demonstration of success by the MVF in mobilizing the community, setting up centres, teaching children and putting them back in school gave a concrete road-map of action to the state government, which now had the funds for RBCs, but did not have an idea of the process with which to spend the funds and set up centres.

4.5 Although the original charter of the MVF was to work in the area of community mobilization and identification of children outside school (and therefore considered child labour by MVF) and to be guided by a philosophy of child rights, the actual work of the MVF was far more intense and across a range of issue areas towards getting the child back in school. These contributions include working as a dispute resolution mechanism- across government Departments, between schools and RBCs, between the Vidyalaya Shiksha Samitis and Panchayats, and between RBCs, schools and coaching schools. The most important contribution of the MVF, however, was in sensitising the mainline government departments of education-district level and below. Each of these had a definite outcome on bringing the children back-in to school.

4.6 Government attitudes changed as a result of MVF persuasion. The state level leadership, political and bureaucratic, was seen as very sensitive to the cause of primary education and had a certain open-ness in working with non-government partners. But this attitude was not shared down the line. The state in-charge for PRATHAM, the other large NGO working in the area of improving quality in education confirmed this when he said 'we have been able to reach the state with ideas. We have even reached the district, but below the district remains a big issue. The Block Education officers lack skills and are not even oriented.'⁷ The special difficulty of this lack of appropriate attitude was that each district now had nearly Rs.100 crores to spend on schools, and each Block Education officer had nearly Rs.10-20 crores. Funds were getting blocked at the sub-district level for lack of ideas and sensitization to the issues involved.

At these levels, the officers were still operating in an 'official' command and control model, reporting financial targets and physical progress, and completely unable to grapple the specifics of activity oriented interventions. As a result, many districts and blocks were unable to open RBCs. PRATHAM admitted that working at the block level needed immense persuasion with government officers, who were often capable of turning people back, without paying heed to the issues being raised. Panchayats were new bodies, and unable to make a dent in the power of block level officers.

4.7 In Patna urban areas, school buildings were a major challenge. Of the 372 government schools, 202 officially did not have a building of their own⁸. Some functioned under trees, some in community centres, and yet others worked in shifts or as part time schools. The MVF mobilised the ward councillors to demand for school buildings and 50 were sanctioned by the District Magistrate. In actual implementation, there was a dispute on the land for many of these. In some cases as many

⁷ Personal interview with Sanjay, State co-ordinator PRATHAM, Pataliputra, Patna, 12th January 2010.

⁸ Figures provided by MVF in a meeting in Patna where the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan's Alternative Education officer Mr. A.K. Pandey was present.

as 5 government Departments claimed ownership of the land. The MVF mediated between the Department for Panchayats, Revenue, Public Works, Municipality and Water works bringing them under the common leadership of the Education department to break ground and move forward.

4.8 The simple act of identification of children who were not in school, was an intense six month long activity in Seetamarhi and required bringing the schools, RBCs, community and Panchayats on a co-operative plank. As Mr. M.Vittal from Seetamarhi reported, an abysmal 30% children were actually attending schools and close to 70% were outside the schools. Children's names were formally on the school register, showing up in Government data as enrolled, but actually not attending. Attendance records were fudged every Saturday, also because Mid-day meal records had to be kept. The MVF started maintaining a second register. Before "clean" data on actual attendance emerged, the MVF had to mobilise the parents, hold meetings at school and cluster levels, meet Panchayat members and convince them of the futility of bogus data.

4.9 In Potiya Panchayat of Arariya district, getting children to schools brought them in sharp conflict with coaching camps that existed right outside the schools. In Madhya Vidyalay Sirasiya where this was indeed the case, Mr. Raveendra Raghu reported that while children were on school registers, they were actually attending a private coaching centre, paying a small fees. The government school teachers were also to be found at the coaching centre. This had the implicit support of the District Superintendent of Education of the government as well. It required the MVF to persuade the teachers to teach in school and for the coaching centre to run only after office hours.

4.10 To address complaints of teachers not teaching, Mohammed Azeem of District Kishenganj had to hold many meetings with teachers, anganwadi workers, ANM workers and Panchayat leaders before many teachers were finally persuaded to come to school regularly.

4.11 The work of the MVF addresses the heart of the schooling challenge by providing implementation support and a firm commitment to institutionalism. The RBC is seen as a mainstreaming mechanism only, even though in Lalganj Vaishali the children found the RBCs better than the school. The poor families were happy too, especially as the RBCs provided full range of support including dress, meals and medical care. The children found the atmosphere very lively in RBCs. The atmosphere of care was a motivation for the children to learn without fear.

Challenges of working in Bihar

5.1 The enthusiasm for inviting MVF notwithstanding, the work of the organisation was faced with unique challenges. While there was a high level of support from the top political and policy leadership of the state and of the Education Department, negotiating the sub-district institutional scenario was often a very difficult task.

5.2 As a result of MVF efforts, Bihar today has over 1200 RBCs with 45,000 children there. The MVF has assisted with developing a whole roadmap of how these institutions are to be set-up and how they must function. The state officers of BEP admit the contribution of MVF and feel that they have assisted in helping the state spend the resources of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan in an effective manner.

5.3 The MVF has been effective in challenging the current approach of the state towards abolishing child labour. The current mechanism does not put children's rights at the centre and is characterised more as an "inspectorate" mechanism based on sudden raids on factories or residential premises and penal action on employers. These raids are made mainly at residential premises and have little credibility amongst people who see it as a mechanism of harassment. In this method, there is little value of what constitutes a full set of restitution of child rights. The "rescued" child is let off to find his way back home, rather than leading him on to develop his or her capabilities and taking him or her to school.

5.4 The approach at reconciliation notwithstanding, the MVF has challenged some of the current approaches towards bringing the girl child to mainstream schooling. It challenges the *Angna Vidyalay* Non Formal Education centres of the Bihar government which sought to educate the girl child closer to the door-step of the home. The MVF feels that this keeps the girl child within domestic confines, whereas coming out to the RBC is a step towards empowerment for the girl child. The RBC promotes gender inclusion, whereas Angna Vidyalay promotes seclusion.

5.5 MVF activists have also taken an open position against caste-based discriminatory practices. At the Seetamarhi RBC, children belonging to different castes kept their eating plates (*Thalis*) separately, maintaining the discriminatory social hierarchy against backward and forward castes. The teacher was unable to challenge this. It required a lot of unrelenting persuasion on the part of the MVF resource persons to challenge this attitude and to treat all children as equal.

5.6 MVF has worked fearlessly in the state, even in the face of challenges from functionaries of the local state and vested interests.

5.7 Finally, status of the children has been enhanced as well, by going to school rather than working at home. Many children report that they were scolded when they only lived at home and did not go to school, or worked on small jobs. Coming to school has enhanced their respectability.

Roadmap for the future & Recommendations

- The BEP and the Education Secretary's appreciation for the work in Bihar: The work of the MVF is recognised as a very sincere effort by both the State Project Director of the Bihar Education Project and the Education Secretary of the Government of Bihar. What is needed is for the MVF to build up a stronger presence at the state level and get due recognition for the hard work put in by them in the field.
- Integrating Panchayati Raj and the MVF work-When the MVF withdraws, the idea is to create a cadre of local youth who will sustain the work together with the local institutions of political decentralisation, the Panchayats. In the author's opinion, while there has been a lot of popular enthusiasm towards the MVF at the local level, the creation of this cadre is at a nascent stage. Further, the state is just about setting out to strengthening its Panchayats to take on local development responsibilities, including that for schools.

- Other NGOs and MVF- MVF and Pratham are two established NGOs that have associated themselves with education in Bihar. The two organisations clearly see their roles in two different areas. While the MVF has strength in field level mobilization and institutional support, Pratham has a domain strength in research and evaluation activities, mainly in learner achievement surveys. Both the NGOs are represented on state level and district level SSA committees and assist with policy and implementation advice. Pratham has expanded implementation support at district level by hiring people to oversee programme implementation. This is a role that the MVF could be performing very well too, provided it overcame the hesitation in asking the state government for funds.
- Implications for Exit at this juncture are clearly with respect to sustaining the MVF interventions. Since these are primarily in the areas of mobilization and the community mobilization has not reached a level where it can carry on its own, there is clearly much to be gained by sustaining the intervention. Also, the Bihar government has made changes in its educational decentralisation legislation as a result of which the Vidyalay Shiksha Samitis will be stronger institutions. In supporting the VSS through trainings and active dispute resolution with Panchayats the MVF has a very strong role to play.
- The road ahead for MVF is in taking the child rights agenda forward keeping the local decentralisation framework as integral.

Reference

Zachariah, J., Nilesh Pandey (2007). Rapid Appraisal of Teacher Recruitment in Bihar: Bihar 2007. Patna, UNICEF.: 21.



Photo 1: Resource persons and students from Seetamarhi RBC at a District evaluation workshop for alternative and innovative education, January 2009.



Photo 2: Children engrossed in a session of physical games at an RBC in Vaishali.



Photo 3: A special residential centre for girls in Seetamarhi district.

TIMES CITY

THE TIMES OF INDIA, PATNA | FRIDAY, JUNE 19, 2009

5L more Bihar kids 'school chale'

Madhuri Kumar | TNN

Patna: "Roke se na ruke hum, suraj sa chamke hum, school chale hum..." Remember the melodious jingle composed for the government of India's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)? The 'School Chale Hum' programme under the SSA has turned out to be one of the most successful endeavours in Bihar with nearly five lakh out-of-school children being brought back to schools under it during the last two years.

In fact, the efforts of Bihar government under the SSA programme, which aims to bring quality elementary education to millions of children, have yielded positive results. Not only has the state been allocated the highest budget, but it has also sent back a record number of children to classrooms.

The success of the programme has now created a need for strengthening the secondary education infrastructure across the country.

In fact, the efforts of Bihar government under the SSA programme, which aims to bring quality elementary education to millions of children, have yielded positive results. Not only has the state been allocated the highest budget, but it has also sent back a record number of children to classrooms

As HRD principal secretary Anjani Kumar Singh said, "Bihar's allocation under SSA for the current year is even more than UP, which is about Rs 4,300 crore. The state made optimum utilisation of its allocation last year also and the results are not far to seek. We have already sent back a record number of kids between the age group of 6 and 14 back to school."

At present, out-of-school children in the age-group of 6-14 years has come down to 3 per cent in 2009 from 13.1 per cent in 2005.

Programme officer Ravi Shankar Singh of Bihar Education Project (BEP), which is the state implementing

agency of SSA, said, "Out of the approved budget, 60 per cent is sanctioned by the Central government, while the rest 40 per cent is shared by the state government. Now approximately 6 lakh (5,22,586) children are out of school, while over five lakh children have been sent back to classrooms."

Similarly, the proportion of out-of-school girls in the state has also dropped from 20.1 per cent in 2005 to 2.92 per cent in 2009, added BEP sources.

What lends further credence to the efforts of the state is that the maximum number of children who have started going back to school are Mus-

lims and SCs. In March 2008, the Muslim child population in Bihar in the age group 6-14 was 33.06 lakh and of them only 2.83 lakh were out of school. The number of out-of-school Muslim children now stands at 1.52 lakh, while 1.57 lakh SC students are yet to attend school.

HRD official also said, "It is indeed one of the most successful flagship programmes. Given the background, in early 2000, when educational infrastructure had almost collapsed and fund utilisation was minimum, the SSA proved its worth. One lakh classrooms and 2.14 lakh teachers are now visible in the state."

SSA, apart from being a programme with clear time frame for elementary education, also offers opportunities to states to develop their own vision of elementary education. It has set 2010 as the deadline for providing useful and relevant elementary education to all children in the 6 to 14 age group.

TELEVIS

List of Interviews:

1. Anjani Kumar Singh, Principal Secretary, Department of Education, New Secretariat, Patna, Government of Bihar, 12th January, 2011.
2. Deepak Kumar, Principal Secretary, Department of Panchayati Raj, New Secretariat, Patna, Government of Bihar, 12th January, 2011.
3. Rajesh Bhushan, State Project Director Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Soochana Bhavan Patna, 12th January, 2011.
4. Sanjay, State co-ordinator PRATHAM, Pataliputra Colony, Patna, 12th January, 2011.
5. Shantha Sinha, Director MV Foundation and chairperson National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, 2nd May 2010.