

Reaching the Unreached

Enabling Dalit Girls to Get Schooling

○ M.V. Sreedhar

With over 39 per cent female illiteracy, according to the 1991 census, it is clear a major new effort is required to include all women, especially the poor, in a programme of universal primary education. Institute for Socially Disadvantaged Groups' Educational Improvement (ISDGEI) based in Kolhapur (Maharashtra) is working for social transformation through education. One of the most disadvantaged groups is poor Dalit women and girls in the urban slums. The institute has been providing primary education to Dalit girls in the Rajendranagar slum of Kolhapur for the last 12 years. In the beginning, they also had boy students in their schools, but as they grew they recognised that the need for schools for poor girls, especially Dalits, was so vastly unmet that they decided to put all their efforts into devising an appropriate and effective educational experience for these children. In this article, the Honorary Director of the ISDGEI, M.V. Sreedhar, explains the challenges they face and the many innovations they have evolved in order to make education accessible to the most disadvantaged of India's children—Dalit girls.

One of the most serious flaws of the Indian educational system is that it fails to provide an education for poor girls and other disadvantaged children, particularly Dalit children. There are many myths that have been perpetuated about the reasons few Dalit children are in school. Politicians and some unthinking members of the media have created a myth that Dalits do not go to school solely owing to their poverty. At the present rate of economic growth, and considering the extremely low share of the poor in the total national income, absolute poverty in India may not be eliminated for another century. Indian politicians cynically think that they can use poverty in India as an excuse for their own failure to support universal primary education for all children.

Deprived children are also the victims of teachers' stereotyped and negative views of their educability. The children often

hear teachers cast aspersions on their supposed poor genetic inheritance. The prejudiced views of the teachers serve the teacher's own self interest; they help teachers to be totally unaccountable for their own performance. The teachers too often join the ignorant in our society in blaming the victims instead of comprehending that the poor performance of many Dalit children is most often the result of life-long discrimination against them. The excuses teachers repeat about the supposed lack of capacity of Dalit children to learn merely serves as an additional means for teachers to cover up their poor ability to teach and the poor functioning of the educational system.

The present educational system is a colonial heritage. As long as education was restricted to the upper class, those who could afford to pay for it, it worked to some extent in producing servants of the Raj by

preparing students from these strata for lower and middle level job opportunities in the bureaucratic apparatus. However, the post-Independence era made a pretence at offering education to everyone who sought it. It made it important for everyone to obtain the education needed to assist them in participating in the economy, the polity and the society. At the same time the society and government did not provide the funds, teachers and an accountable school system that would enable the schools to provide universal education, or make any structural or academic changes in the traditional colonial curriculum and school system to accommodate the different requirements of the new set of entrants who had previously been deprived of formal education. Academic programmes conceived as a means of upward mobility in colonial society for a restricted cultural universe of better-off children were the only formal

educational model available for what little schooling was offered to Dalit children. When the few Dalit children who were offered this type of education did not do well, they were blamed for not taking advantage of the new openings.

We at the ISDGEI have redesigned our educational programme, curriculum, and teacher training programme, and adopted a new philosophy of education to provide encouragement to Dalit girls, who face more obstacles than any other group of children, to enrol in our basic educational programmes. Our approach and curriculum make it far more likely that these children will make good progress in school. Some of our structural changes are outlined below, integrated with a description of how we counter some of the obstacles that hinder learning among Dalit children, especially girls. But first we outline the remedies we adopted to remove some of the common, seemingly minor bureaucratic obstacles that have already proved devastating to so many otherwise eligible poor Dalit children.

Birth Proof as Hurdle

Using the government school admission procedures in the urban slum where our school is located as an example of a widespread practice in Indian primary schools, the need to produce a birth certificate at the time of admission to class I, and the single point of entry to primary school, denies many poor children admission. Since registration of births and deaths with the appropriate authorities is seldom, if ever, enforced in India, and since most Dalit children are born in huts rather than in maternity care centres that register births, there is rarely an



Morning prayer assembly of classes V to VII

official record of their date of birth. The parents usually have a very vague idea of when a child was born and the time they are supposed to enter school. Further, school admission takes place in June and July every year, when the child's family is often recalled to rural areas, where they are usually busy in agricultural activities. Therefore, if the parents fail to produce the birth certificate or fail to enrol the child in school in the proper year during the months of June and July, the school refuses the child admission. The school rarely follows up to see that some substitute documentation of age is obtained, and consequently the child often never enters school at all and eventually grows up as an illiterate adult. The family that persists in attempting to gain school admission for their child but still does not have a birth certificate frequently finds it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain admission into class II or III according to the child's appropriate age. The schools only offer admission into class I

at a single point of entry—when the child is between five to six years old. At present, the schools do not allow direct admission of an older child into higher classes.

Need for Transfer Certificate

Poverty stricken parents are always on the move in search of jobs. When parents move from one locality to another, even within the same city, the school in the new location will not admit the child until a school transfer certificate is produced. Parents frequently have to visit the old school over and over again to get this certificate, which should be easily available to them. Each visit results in the loss of wages for that day plus the cost of transportation. Powerless against the incompetent callous bureaucracy, the parents too often give up out of frustration and despair and the child drops out of the educational system.

In 1990 the Maharashtra government issued an order stating that no child should be denied admission to school for want of a birth certificate or a transfer certificate. The schools were ordered to obtain the certificates for the child

after admitting the student. Government and private management primary schools have ignored the government order and continue to demand the discriminatory and unnecessary paperwork that keeps many poor children from getting an education. The government has not cared to ensure implementation of its order. In fact, insistence on bureaucratic formalities such as birth and transfer certificates may justifiably be viewed as obstacles purposely placed in the way of the poor by the elite to deny them, especially the Dalits, a key pre-requisite to progress, a proper primary school education. ISDGEI schools do not require such documentation; they rely on the parents and the community to provide informal equivalents that will facilitate the child's entry into school. The school takes upon itself the responsibility for obtaining the transfer certificate.

Inconvenient School Hours

Children from poor families have to do time consuming household chores, as well as find ways to supplement their family income so that the family can survive. Those parents who have not yet recognised the vital importance of providing their children with an education remove the child from school if there is a conflict between the child's responsibility to the family and the school timings. For instance, in Maharashtra, primary school classes commence at 7.20 a.m. on weekdays and Saturdays as well as during all of March and April. On many days poor children are unable to complete their chores at home in time for school and are therefore forced to absent themselves from classes. Our institute's classes begin at 8.30 a.m.

Primary school summer vacations are a British heritage that serve no

purpose for poor families as they are uncoordinated with the agricultural production seasons. In the rural areas, the entire family, including the school-age children, work agricultural land during the agricultural seasons. In the case of migrating labour, for labour unemployed in the village itself, the entire family moves out to other areas where work is available. Since a major segment of even urban poor children in India are engaged in agricultural activities as well, primary school vacations must be coordinated with the agricultural seasons, so that the children do not miss their classes when the family seasonally migrates or is engaged in intensive labour in their own villages. In ISDGEI schools no action is taken against such children. Instead, they are brought up to the class average by offering them individualised coaching daily from 5 to 6 p.m.

The institute's schools modify their hours and vacations to make them suitable for maximum attendance for the poor girls. Though the institute is legally obliged to follow the rules and

regulations of the Maharashtra School Board, including the timing of vacations, off the record the institute reduces vacation during the summer by 15 days and during Diwali by 10 days to offer vocational training to the children from classes V to VII and to adult women. Attendance for the teachers is compulsory; they participate either as trainers or as resource persons.

Girls as Surrogate Mothers

Poor girls have to take on the role of surrogate mothers to their younger siblings which often prevents them from attending classes. The institute encourages these girls to attend and complete primary school by attaching a creche to take care of the younger siblings or, alternately, to allow the younger siblings to sit in the class along with the older children.

Cost of Education

Even when poor children are admitted to free primary education in a government school, the opportunity cost of education remains quite high for many poor



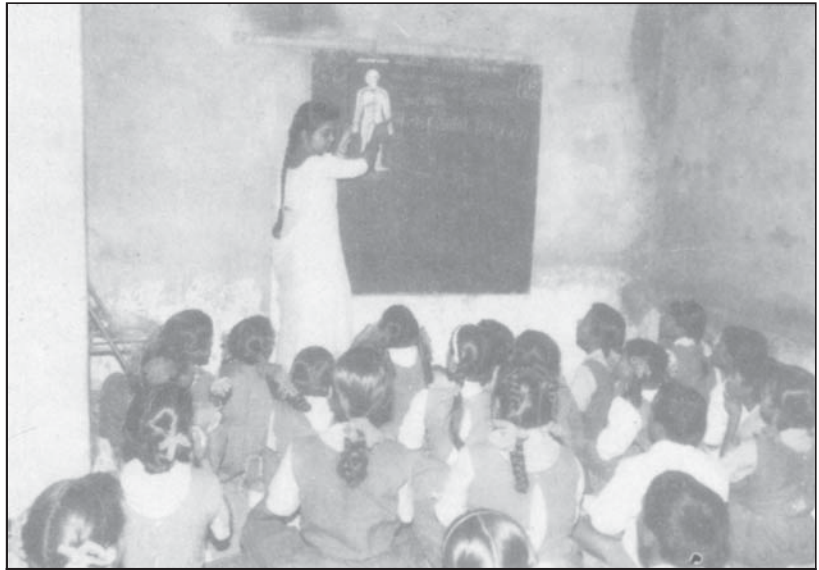
Demonstrating the Archimedes theory of water displacement

families. Apart from losing the economic value of the labour services the child has been providing to the family, the parents have to meet the cost of textbooks and notebooks, uniforms, and other school related expenses. In a lot of families, these costs act as a damper on the likelihood that the parents would send their child to school.

The institute provides free textbooks, notebooks, and other school supplies and tries to cover many school expenses for Dalit girls enrolled in our pre-school and school programmes. Though the ISDGEI schools use the textbooks prescribed by the government, the teachers also refer to different books in the institute libraries, including encyclopedias. The teachers prepare notes to supplement the curriculum for the supplementary materials in the institute libraries. Children from class III onwards also get books and journals from the library issued in their names.

Differences in Skills

Having discussed some of the structural features of the school system that hinder the Dalit girls from going to school that are relatively easier to remedy, let us have a look at academic skill differences that are likely to exist between the children from different social segments of our society. Children from different cultural and class backgrounds undergo different types of socialisation processes which in turn result in different experiences, values and types of language use. The pre-school experience of a middle class child tallies with the school sub-culture and language patterns used in the school. Therefore, a middle class child finds a continuity between its home and the school. As it confronts materials that are



Class VII being explained blood circulation through a model

congruent with its underlying skills, the child is more likely to succeed in school. However, the pre-school experience of a Dalit child differs from those that the traditional school expects or assumes to be present as a prerequisite. The Dalit child finds a discontinuity between its pre-school experiences at home and the expectations of the school. Due to this discontinuity, the Dalit child is unprepared to face the challenges of the school. Therefore, from the day of its admission into the school, a Dalit child finds herself in a disadvantaged position when compared to a middle class child. Nevertheless, the Dalit child is expected to compete with the middle class child on a curriculum tailor-made for middle class children.

Language is a skill, like driving and swimming. The greater the exposure to and practice of these skills, the greater the ability to use them. Middle class mothers expose their children to linguistic nuances from day one of the child's birth by telling stories, putting questions to the child and answering the questions themselves in a

monologue pattern. By the time the middle class children are about two years old they are able to express themselves within the limited vocabulary at their disposal. As they grow older, the middle class children increase their verbal interaction with adults. This helps them develop a good command over verbal communication. As compared to this situation, the parents of deprived children communicate far less with them. Even by the time they reach three to four years of age, frequently the only verbal exposure to language is in the form of one or two word commands. This restricted exposure to language has an impact not only on the child's memory span, but also prevents them from developing the ability to comprehend many verbal stimuli as well as the ability to express themselves freely in different social contexts. This is illustrated with the example of two recorded statements from part of the data collected by Smt Sulochana Sreedhar for her Ph.D. thesis *Universalization of Elementary Education: Some Issues*, published in 1967.

A picture of a guava tree, on

which a parrot was seen eating a guava. Also seen in the picture is a gardener with a stick.

A Harijan child age six gave this response [literal translation from Marathi]: "One remains parrot. And there going eating guava. And it told him to and saying eat don't saying no. And said again you will be killed saying."

Compare this to the response of a middle class child age six to the same picture: "There was a parrot green cool. That parrot likes very much ripe guava. That parrot flying went to the guava tree. Tree over sitting guava eating started. That time tree's owner from there came. He that parrot told "guava eat not just now ripe not that unripe guava eaten if then you to stomach in pain get."

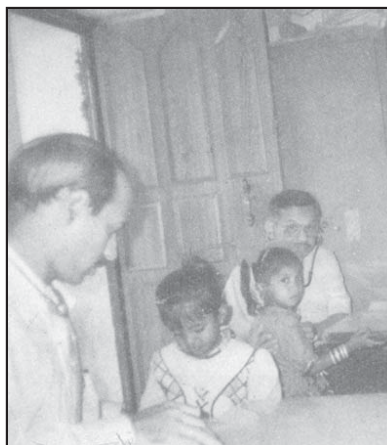
The two responses given above clearly show not only the language differences in the two sets of children but even the value system they had acquired because of the difference in their pre-school socialisation process. Since the language and the value system used in the middle class biased schools tally with those practised in middle class families, these children on entering school at the age of five plus experience a continuity between home and school, whereas because of the lack of exposure to language in diverse contexts, the deprived child on entering school finds a discontinuity between its home and the school.

Teachers' Negative Attitude

When teachers take a low opinion about the learning abilities of Dalit children it often acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy that is as effective in many cases as would be a deliberate attempt on the part of teachers to push out or eliminate the Dalit children from the educational stream.

Each child on entering school

brings to the class a linguistic code acquired as part of the socialisation process at home prior to attending school. In the case of a middle class child, the code acquired tallies with that of the school code and hence the student is likely to perform better in her studies whereas the code a Dalit child acquired at home is quite different from that of the school. For example, a Dalit child is likely to say, "mi tikde gelto" instead of "mi tikde gelo hoto" (I had gone there). Similarly a Dalit child is likely to say, "Tyo cha piyunshyan bata martuya" whereas a middle class version would be "To cha piyum gappa marto" (Having taken tea, he chats). The failure of the teachers to recognise these different codes in a positive manner to accelerate learning makes it much harder for these children to progress in school. The linguistically untrained teachers put every speech form in the pigeon hole of 'right' or 'wrong' based on what they were told is 'correct'. The Dalit children find that their own linguistic code is always placed in the slot labelled 'wrong'. The Dalit child is punished or ridiculed in the classroom for using the code acquired at home. What is ignored by the teachers is that language is an identifying label and the teacher



Rotary medical exam in creche

who rejects the linguistic code of the Dalit child rejects not only the child's code but also all those who speak the same code, including the child's peer group, friends, and parents. Since a child spends more time outside the classroom than in it, if a child has to make a choice between the classroom and her peer group she is more likely to choose the latter and in the process gets totally alienated from the school, leading to drop-outs. What the school needs to do is to provide a bridge for the child to learn the new language code, while not belittling her home code.

The Burden of 'Homework'

It is especially difficult for Dalit children to do their homework properly as their illiterate parents are not in a position to help their children, nor does their home have a quiet place that facilitates studying. The importance of homework in the traditional primary schools is a major reason the Dalit child lags behind the other children in the class.

Our Educational Philosophy

At the outset, the ISDGEI based its educational philosophy on three principles:

- ◆ No child is uneducable.
- ◆ If children from deprived groups fail to benefit from the formal educational system the fault lies with the system and hence the system must be changed.
- ◆ A child is never at fault if learning fails to take place.

After working with Dalit girls residing in the slums of Kolhapur for more than a decade, the ISDGEI has been able to confirm the basic correctness of this approach as it has gained more and more experience in implementing its educational programme.

Before ISDGEI set up its present

educational complex in the Rajendranagar slum in 1990, girls there usually got married between the ages of 4 and 10. The institute has now succeeded in preventing many child marriages by encouraging every girl child in the slum to enter into our educational programme and committing ourselves to retain them until they complete Class VII. The salient features of the teaching-learning process adopted by the ISDGEI includes a strong pre-school programme that begins from the time the Dalit girl child reaches the age of two. There are few *Anganwadis* in most of the urban slums and even fewer in rural areas. Even among those few, it is rare for them to have as strong an educational component as do the institute's creches.

In this pre-school creche programme:

- ◆ Instead of the girl children going to the school, the school has gone to the doorsteps of the girl's own family by renting huts for classrooms there and educating them in these neighbourhood huts.

- ◆ The creche units set up in these huts offer Dalit girls a free nutritious meal that assists them in maintaining their health, a basic prerequisite for alertness for learning.

- ◆ The creche units provide school preparation for these Dalit girls that tries to substitute as much as possible for the advantages a middle class home, community, and relative affluence offer to middle class children. In the first instance, the ISDGEI offers the creche children the maximum exposure to the language by telling stories to the two year old children. For instance, instead of telling the whole story, after every two to three sentences, the children are asked



Child labourers playing at a holiday camp on the Malvan coast

questions and the teachers themselves answer the questions. In the course of 6 to 12 months every child is able not only to understand the whole sequence but also answer the questions themselves, as well as repeat the whole story. They also participate in various games that involve heavy use of language. Through these attempts, by the time they are in the upper kindergarten unit, their understanding of standard Marathi is near perfect.

In upper kindergarten (for children three to five years), in addition to involving the children in greater verbal interaction with the teachers, the children also engage in various science experiments. For instance, the creche unit has a few magnets. The children discover themselves which items are attracted to the magnet. Each child is told to fill plastic bags with mud and then put seeds in it and add a small quantity of water daily. When the seeds sprout and become saplings the children are told not to pour water in a few of the bags. In a few days' time, they learn that water is essential for living beings.

Thereafter, a few bags are tied up airtight after putting in water. When they find after two days the saplings in these bags are faded, they also learn that air is also required for living things. The need for air for burning is learnt by lighting two candle sticks and then by covering one with a glass.

Different varieties of grains and pulses are stored in different bottles. The children are not only taught their names but also their uses. The creche unit has a large number of mechanical toys and building blocks which the children use freely. There are also picture cards that include birds, other animals, domesticated and wild, trains, trucks and other vehicles. They learn not only the names of these objects, the food habits of the animals, and their habitat but also mimic their sounds. They also learn that cars and buses travel by road, aeroplanes in the air, ships and boats in the water, etc.

The other items the children know are the names of the different colours. They learn to point out the colour of objects, the four principal and four

subsidiary directions, the names of the months and days in Marathi and in English, the names of their parents, the name of the school, full address, name of the taluka, district, state and country.

Marathi script is introduced to them through flashcards when they are four-and-half years old and are getting ready to join class I at the age of five years. The script introduced is only for recognition of two or three letter words, which they can read. The writing of the script starts only at class I. In the process, the Dalit girls acquire the skills required to compete in school with their middle class counterparts.

◆ In the creche units, Dalit girls are accepted as they are, even if many of them, for example, have unkempt hair and dresses that are sometimes untidy and in poor repair. Similarly, the language forms they use are not criticised. Parent-child verbal communication is not as fully developed in many Dalit families as in most middle class families; therefore, the children often suffer learning disabilities as a consequence. The institute teachers encourage the children to speak up as much as possible, whatever their language skills, to give them confidence and to put them at ease. At the same time the girls are exposed to standard forms of the language via a monologue pattern. Story telling and role play are also used to improve language skills in both listening and speaking. In the process, the children learn standard Marathi in a gradual and non-humiliating way; we call it Learning Without Tears.

◆ The institute tries to create a sense of participation and belonging to the school among both children and teachers. This not only enables the institute to

enhance the self-confidence of the children, but also encourages both the students and their teachers to contribute the maximum to achieve the institute's goals.

◆ The children are informed in a friendly way how to remedy their specific learning difficulties rather than the teachers berating them in some global manner as poor students and telling them their difficulties in learning are a result of parental shortcomings.

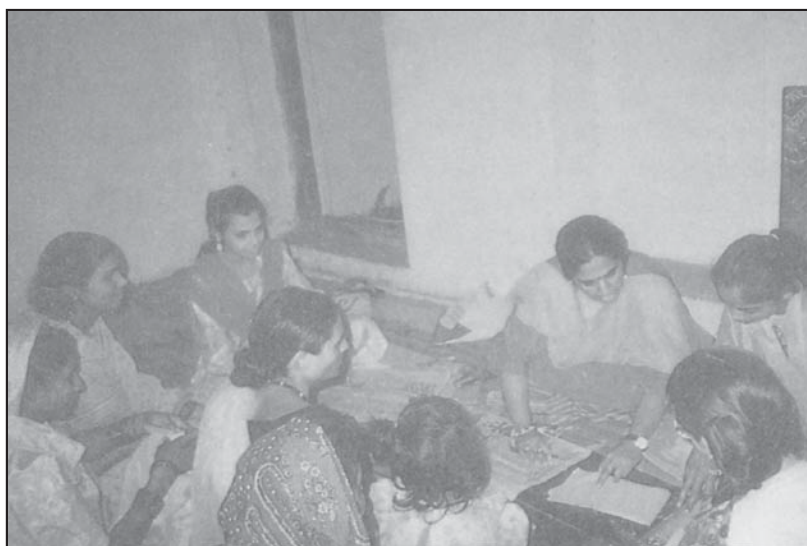
When parental shortcomings are discussed they are usually described as a consequence of illiteracy and are considered remediable. The children are advised to behave like educated persons. In the process, the teachers become a new reference group. At the same time the children are not alienated from their parents.

◆ While all the schools have a class teacher who teaches the entire set of subjects for a particular class, the institute also has subject teachers. The subjects are assigned according to the preferences of the teachers. For instance, if a teacher opts for arithmetic, she would teach arithmetic for classes I to VII besides teaching her own general subjects

class. This enables the teachers to also have a specialisation that they enjoy more and have more experience in teaching so that they can put in their best.

◆ The institute teaches only Marathi and arithmetic in class I as compared to the four subjects taught from the beginning in other schools. Science is introduced as a third subject in class II and the last of the regular subjects is introduced in class III. In view of the high proficiency the children develop by focusing at first on language and arithmetic rather than trying to cover the entire curriculum, the children are ready by then to study subjects like history and geography on their own, with minimum support from the teachers.

◆ The institute has totally discarded the adage 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. This is one of the themes discussed in the pre-service orientation course for training teachers. The teachers have strict instructions not even to admonish the children, let alone physically punish a child. Children are told the cause and effect of different actions and they are themselves to decide which of their



Vocational class in tailoring for adult women

actions are to be given up or retained rather than the teacher telling them what to do and what not to do. In the process they attain self-discipline.

◆ The institute tests not for grading the children or for passing or failing them, but rather to enable the teacher to understand how much of the information she is attempting to convey has been absorbed. If the children learn less than she expects the child to be able to accomplish, the teacher tries to figure out where she went wrong in her teaching, rather than blaming it on the child.

◆ The answers for a test are given to the girls the very next day in the same class period. The teacher explains each of the questions and how the correct answer is to be arrived at in the class. The same test paper is administered a fortnight later to allow all the children to show how much better they can perform. As a result the children never suffer from examination fever.

The teacher's expectation of her pupil's performance may serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. By creating a new expectation among the children that they can learn more than they previously believed, this can, and often does, affect their actual performance. And this approach has aided us in teaching children from the creche units to class VII, particularly in the case of new entrants from other schools.

Daily classes are conducted from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and a separate free coaching class is conducted from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday for the children who are having trouble learning so that they can come up to the class average. The entire teaching-learning process, including the tutorial assignments, are done in the classroom itself under the supervision of the teachers. No



Women receiving literacy certificates

homework is assigned.

◆ The institute offers sex education for girls above 12 years. This helps them, for example, to realize that menstruation is a natural process and they need not feel mentally upset about it. Further, sex education also helps them understand how they can plan their family.

◆ Crafts and vocational education are both taught as they save the child from the tyranny of purely theoretical instruction and balance the intellectual and practical elements in the child's experience. Vocational training is offered to the children from classes V to VII to help them be self-reliant when they leave the school. If they cannot continue their education, the institute helps them to find work that earns them about Rs 50 per day so that these Dalit girls can be self-supporting and stand on their own with dignity and self-respect.

The institute also runs an open school. This is a unique experiment in India that enrolls 10 to 14 year old illiterate working girls who are not in school. The enrolment is open throughout the year. Classes are held from 11 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. each day,

though the girls can come to the class whenever they are free. The teachers offer them individualised coaching. Efforts are made to prepare them to appear for the class IV exam of the Municipal School Board (MSB) two years from the time they enrol and then, for those who pass the exam, two years further on, many can and do appear for the class VII exam.

School Without Exams

The institute does not conduct examinations. Their names are sent to the MSB. So far eight batches of children have been prepared for the class IV exam and three batches for the class VII exam with no failures; many of the girls have secured 65 to 70 per cent marks. Some of the illiterate girls who enrolled in the open school in 1991-92 are now studying in the IXth and Xth standards. Were it not for the institute's open school, those working girls would have grown up to be adult illiterates. The institute also conducts night schools for two-and-a-half hours for girls who are full time labourers in the different slums of Kolhapur. Most of them are garbage pickers,

domestic servants, work in the sugarcane fields, gather firewood, and do other similar unskilled and poorly paid labour.

The institute also conducts adult literacy classes for the illiterate women in the Rajendranagar slum. About 270 women have been made literate in this slum. During 1996-97, 230 women were offered adult literacy classes. During the last two years the ISDGEI had a shortage of teachers and hence during 1997-98 and 1998-99 only 28 women were offered adult literacy classes each year. These women are also given vocational training in different trades so that they can earn about Rs 50 per day. However, the institute has not achieved much in the area of the income generating programme for want of accommodations. It has neither land nor buildings of its own. The initial efforts are being conducted in different rented huts.

Awareness Campaigns

An important activity of the institute are the lane meetings to create a sense of awareness amongst the slum dwellers concerning the problems of illiteracy, the need for educating the girl child, the dangers of child labour, the negative consequences of child marriage, the value of adopting the small family norm, the usefulness of developing saving habits, the need for gender equality and the economic empowerment of women. The institute has plans to conduct a literacy campaign in the slum to make all the women literate within the next two years. This year 15 women, who had been enrolled in the institute's adult literacy class the year before appeared for the government class IV examination. During 1997-98, out of 25 women who attended the adult literacy classes, 15 appeared at the class IV examinations conducted by the

government and all 15 passed.

A major problem for the ISDGEI is to learn more about the effects of its educational programmes. The institute has begun documenting its activities more systematically. Our objective is to ensure that every child in our schools remains with us from the point of enrolment to class VII. Presently the institute has two former students in class X, 24 in class IX and 32 in class VIII in a neighbouring high school. The institute arranged block enrolment in order to assure parents of safety for their daughters when they went on for further education. The illiterate parents have a very conservative attitude towards their daughters, particularly regarding mixing with boys. So we arrange admission for 8 to 10 girls in the same school. Usually all the girls are admitted in two neighbouring high schools, even though the quality of teaching in both the schools is not at the desired level.

The institute has long-term information until 1998 about the educational progress of children enrolled in class I from the creche units in 1991. The institute still has a few boys in all the primary classes from class IV upwards who were enrolled during the period when the institute was enrolling both boys and girls in the creche units.

Results of Our Work

The Rajendranagar slum contains 3,300 people—1,735 males and 1,565 females, a female to male sex ratio of 902. There are 711 girls in the slum in the 5 to 18 age group, according to a socio-economic survey conducted by its teachers during the period May-June 1997.

Every year from June 1999 onwards the two creche units contained 60 girls two to five years old. Ordinarily direct admission is given to girls who enter the creche

at age two to enter class I at age five. Class I usually has an enrolment of approximately 45 girls.

Primary school classes had 315 children in classes I to VII—a total of 256 girls and 59 boys. More than a third of the 711 girls in the slum are enrolled in the primary classes. The number of Dalits enrolled was 273, including 227 girls and 46 boys. There were 42 children enrolled who were not Dalits, including 29 girls, mainly from extremely poor Muslim families. There were 86 per cent Dalit students in classes I through VII.

The open school contained 59 working girls (all Dalits). Every year upto 10 working children appear at the class IV exams and up to five working children at the class VII annual school exams recognised by the MSB who set the questions. Thus far none of our students from the open school has failed at these exams.

There were 26 girls in the night school for full time girl labourers.

The total number of students in the ISDGEI schools was 460, or 14 per cent of the total population.

From April, 1995 through April 1998 of those who took the exams:

Year	Boys and Girls Passed	Failed
1995	6 boys & 18 girls	3
1996	7 boys & 20 girls	2
1997	13 boys & 15 girls	1
1998	5 boys & 25 girls	2
Total	31 boys & 78 girls	8

The institute owns a fairly rich library including encyclopedias in both Marathi and English, science lab equipment, sports articles, and vocational training equipment. Vocational training is offered in seven trades. All the girl children seeking admission in the creche

units at the age of two plus can continue in the school till passing class VII. After that we try to persuade their mothers to enrol all of them in class VIII in the high schools in the neighbourhood. Some of the illiterate working girl children who took admission in the open school in the 1990s have reached class IX. All the Dalit children from class III onwards can read less difficult books with comprehension, though all of them are first generation learners.

None of the students in the institute schools was married off as children. The institute created an awareness amongst the illiterate women about value of education for girls, against the practice of child labour and child marriage, for the adoption of the small family norm, for economic empowerment of women, and for similar social reforms.

To Sum Up

We have to work hard to create conditions that are conducive for the education of the deprived girl child, however unconventional a route the schools may have to take. These include. :

- Not insisting birth and transfer certificates at the time of entry of a child in an *anganwadi* or creche. The *aya* in charge should be given the authority to establish a birth date in consultation with the mother that will be used for the rest of the child's education. Securing the transfer certificate must be the responsibility of the school.
- School timings must conform to the needs of the community, particularly the agricultural community. Therefore the summer and Diwali-Puja holidays must give way to a school year based on the periods of need for family labour during the agricultural seasons. There are now too many school



Child labourers having lunch at a holiday camp at Ratnagiri

holidays during the year that handicap educational efforts

- The children should be relieved from the tyranny of rote learning of the textual materials which are irrelevant to skill formation and personality development. Therefore, craft experience or vocational training must be introduced from the primary school itself along with the regular curriculum rather than at the plus 12 stage.
- The curriculum in the teacher training institutes is so outmoded that it is unsuitable even for the education of middle class children. Therefore a thoroughly new curriculum that would cater to the requirements of the present situation should be devised. This curriculum must include sociology of education, social psychology, elementary linguistics and other subjects that would help them comprehend the social context in which their students live and how to use an understanding of that context to facilitate learning even among the most poor and socially

deprived children.

- At the micro level, the teacher is the pivot around which the educational system revolves. The teachers at all levels must, therefore, be made accountable for the salary they draw, if necessary, by resorting to 'payment by result' rather than the present tenure system. Alternatively, it might also be useful to have students and parents evaluate the teachers.
- Despite 50 years of investment in their education, the vast majority of the children from the Dalit, poor Muslim, and the other deprived groups, are still rotting as child labour rather than being in schools, yet there is relatively little outcry against this atrocity among the leaders of these communities. Is it possible to assume that the leaders of these communities see advantages in leaving their constituents uneducated and thereby dependent on the dispensations of their leaders as ignorant vote banks?
- The government has been making a lot of claims about

achieving universal elementary education by 2005. The politicians have also been promising they would introduce a bill to amend the Indian Constitution to make education a fundamental right. They totally ignore the fact that the Supreme Court had already declared primary education a fundamental right, and further ignore the fact that the Constitution of India incorporated a number of fundamental rights, like equality before law and equality of opportunities under different Articles which remain dead letters for the deprived poor. This proposed amendment will also remain a dead letter for the deprived poor whose children will continue to slog in dingy work places for long hours as child labourers instead of learning in school.

➤ The government should make education a duty of the state, rather than taking to gimmicks like making education a fundamental right. When education is made a duty of the state, and education of children is made universal and compulsory, the parents will be unable to treat their children as property to be mortgaged, sold and placed in the child labour market. And the state will be accountable to its duty to provide an adequate number of functioning schools and to ensure that every child attends these schools.

Making education the duty of the state preceded the abolition of child labour the world over. For instance, comparatively small countries like South Korea, North Vietnam and others made education the duty of the state during the 1940s. China had an 80 per cent illiteracy rate but nevertheless made primary education compulsory in 1949. □

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