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Building Hope and Aspirations: An Educational Experiment in Maharashtra

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Abstract

There was a realization that education that was enunciated as a directive principle and therefore a desirable goal should become a fundamental right. With the introduction of Right to Education (RTE) it became imperative for the Indian state to ensure that it became a strategy of inclusion. However the state is facing a difficult front vis-à-vis inclusion child labourers into the schooling system. Aurangabad Municipal Corporation which is part of the Marathawada region took an initiative by launching an innovative BHAU-DIDEE scheme. This paper attempts to capture the first impressions of this scheme.

[Keywords: education, child labour, schooling, poverty]

BHAU (Building Hope and Aspirations for You), DIDEE (Dedicated Initiative for Deprived Element) and Prerak DIDI (Development Education Endeavour for Distributing Inspiration) is a composite programme that was inaugurated by the Aurangabad Municipal Corporation in the State of Maharashtra under the existing Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 to ensure that children in the age group of 6 to 14 years attend schooling. There is recognition that education could be one of the sites through which the perpetuation of class/caste/religion/gender based marginalization can be challenged and that free and compulsory education would in the near future become a strategy that enables social mobility. It was in this context that this right to education which was merely a directive to the Indian state until recently was legislated as a fundamental right. Now principally every citizen of India can access free and compulsory primary education in the above mentioned age group children.

However one of the major lacuna that was witnessed while operationalising the RTE was that many of the children who did not school belonged to the lower income and socially and culturally backward communities. This meant that their attendance in the school was more or less non-uniform as their family required their services and labour to ensure survival of their primary needs. To compound this problem further, the migratory processes complicated the targeting of these children and also ensuring their regular schooling. Those who do understand the importance of education lose interest due to reasons that vary- some feel that they are misfits in the education system, some have psychological adjustment problems, some face reprimand from teachers and peers and therefore feel discouraged.

The existence of child labour indicates denial of basic citizenship rights to the individual child-who in his/her childhood experiences extreme forms of violence (physical, mental, symbolic),

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unhygienic surroundings, exploitation of all kinds, is denied basic learning skills necessary for further survival, is usually found to be malnourished and many a times suffers from various ailments which in some cases lead to permanent deformities and even death.¹ This is especially true of children who work in hazardous environments such as chemical, metal, plastic, firework, match, cement, mining related units and industries among many more such unsafe occupations. (Bose, 2000, Malhi, 2006, Roy, 1998)

It was in this context that the Ministry of Labour and Employment has been implementing the National Child Labour Projects (NCLPs) for the rehabilitation of child workers since 1988. Initially, these projects were industry specific and aimed at rehabilitating children working in traditional child labour endemic industries. A renewed commitment to fulfil the constitutional mandate resulted in enlarging the ambit of the NCLPs in 1994 to rehabilitate children working in hazardous occupations in child labour endemic districts. (Chatterjee, 2002, Gupta, 1995)

Under the Scheme, working children are identified through child labour survey, withdrawn from work and put into the special schools, so as to provide them with enabling environment to join mainstream education system. In these Special Schools, besides formal education, they are provided stipend of Rs. 100/- per month, nutrition, vocational training and regular health checkups. In addition, efforts are also made to target the families of these children so as to cover them under various developmental and income/employment generation programmes of the Government. The Scheme also envisages awareness generation campaigns against the evils of child labour and enforcement of child labour laws. However this scheme proved to have many loopholes. To counter these problems of attracting children to enroll in schools the Aurangabad Municipal corporation inaugurated the BHAU-DIDEE scheme.

Special schools and strategies have been instituted to ensure that special requirements will be catered to by trained teachers. In places where the government could not inaugurate these schools, the children continue to enroll in 'normal' schools. But despite these efforts it was realized that the school dropout rate was very high. To tackle this problem this new scheme called the BHAU- DIDEE programme was initiated in designated schools within the jurisdiction of Aurangabad Municipality.

Under this scheme, the BHAU and DIDEE are voluntary actors who bear multiple responsibilities. They are involved in identifying children who have not yet been recipients of this scheme, to

1. More than 90% child labour is found in rural areas, agriculture and allied employments like cultivation, agricultural labour, livestock, forestry mining and fisheries. Other than these, especially in urban areas, children are found working in hazardous industries such as chemical factories, match making and firework factories, beedi and tobacco related manufacturing units, garbage dumps among others. Though a number of occupations have not been listed under the hazardous industries, scholars and human right activists argue that working in slaughter houses, brick kilns, construction or even working day long at traffic signals are also equally harmful to the health of the children. (Sarkar, 2008, Satyanarayana, 2007, Souda, 2007, Vishnupriya, 1997)

ensure that the existing enrolled children are tutored so that they perform at par in school and this way ensure that they track the activities of the child not only at school but also outside school. Each student/group of students is assigned a BHAU or DIDI who is accountable for the progress of the child/children. This kind of personalized attention also helps the child psychologically as he/she feels wanted and needed. The child feels that he/she has an extended family and that any problem that he/she cannot discuss with immediate family members can be raised with the BHAU and DIDI. This is especially true of children who step into the adolescent period and who require constant counseling.

In this scheme students who enroll have suitable school timings- in the morning and afternoon. The timings are adjusted in such a manner that the child does not loose as he/she has to also provide his/her labour at home and many a times cannot attend only day or night schools. Mid-day meals are provided and also other facilities such as free regular medical check-ups, free learning material, uniforms and others. Once they are capable of entering 'normal' schools they are mainstreamed. Some students are mainstreamed and yet attend these classes such that they can make up for lost years. Thus the centers act as feeder channels such that the child becomes accustomed to regular schooling.

Under this scheme, the BHAU and DIDEE are voluntary actors who bear multiple responsibilities. They are involved in identifying children who have not yet been recipients of this scheme, to ensure that the existing enrolled children are tutored so that they perform at par in school and this way ensure that they track the activities of the child not only at school but also outside school. Each student/group of students are assigned a BHAU or DIDEE who is accountable for the progress of the child/children. This kind of personalised attention also helps the child psychologically as he/she feels wanted and needed. The child feels that he/she has an extended family and that any problem that he/she cannot discuss with immediate family members can be raised with the BHAU and DIDI. This is especially true of children who step into the adolescent period and who require constant counseling.

But what effect does this relationship have on the BHAU and DIDI? After all such an intensive relationship would also definitely alter the sensitivity of these actors. How do the children feel about such a relationship? Can this relationship develop into life long bonding? What are the problems that one faces in such an experiment- both the children and BHAU/DIDI? Does this relationship have a larger impact arena i.e. does the trust relationship criss-cross such that it no longer remains only a device of vigilance over the children but diffuses to other areas of social relationships? These are some of the issues on which this research will focus.

In keeping with these objectives another set of actors called the Prerak Didi have been mobilised. All of them are women actors and their primary role is to organise taking and bringing back children from the school. This ensures that the regularity of the children and also ensures daily contact with the families of these children. These actors are volunteers who

usually belong to the Special help groups (SHGs) operating within these localities who are well aware of their social surroundings.

Methodology and Findings

This research paper examines the BHAU/DIDEE scheme in only one district i.e. Aurangabad. This scheme was initiated in Aurangabad district in 3rd January 2011. The district has 76 special/regular schools that cater to these children. The total number of children under this scheme is 989. Of these there are 603 boys and 386 girls. In all there have been 70 BHAU/DIDI volunteers and about 15 Prerak Didi's who have been involved thus far.

This research was based on participatory research observation and employs the exploratory research design. The case study method was used to highlight the positive benefits accruing from such an exercise. In-depth interviews with voluntary Bhau-Didi personnel, Swayamsevaks who operate in the 76 schools denotified by the Municipal corporation, officials of the Aurangabad Municipal Corporation, parents and the children, together with the Prerak Didi's were undertaken. Some of the research questions were related to the context in which this scheme was begun. How does it address the issue of child labour and related problems? Which are the participating agencies and how do they interact with each other? What are the problems that arise due to crisscrossing of various agencies and actors? What are the positive effects of these interactions? What has been the impact of this interaction on the participant actors (Bhau, Didi and also the 'Prerak Didi)? What do the students (children) gain from such an informal form of interaction? How does it fill the void of a parent and mentor? How do the participating actors visualize these kinds of 'accountable' responsibilities? How does it help them shape their personality? What are the unintended consequences (positive and negative) in such circumstances? Can these informal and familial interactions be generalised and employed in other areas of social participation- such as building trust networks, for women related schemes, for orphan children among many others?

Statistical analysis pointed out that 62% of the children who have been absorbed in the BHAU-DIDEE project had a prior experience of schooling and had to withdraw from the formal educational system due to certain constraints such as poverty, migration and lack of cultural capital within the family and the community to recognise the importance of formal education. From this data it can be ascertained that the majority of children belong to the deprived communities and families. The project therefore is extremely significant as it targets not only children in the early age group but a large number of adolescent children some of whom have also been working as child labourers. Some of these children had to be counseled as they had become addicted to various tobacco related and alcohol related activities. What is also interesting is the fact that a sizeable proportion of these adolescents are girls. Given the gender bias in our society, adolescent girls are usually married off. It is in this context that the BHAU-DIDEE's have done a commendable job in ensuring that these girl children also become part of the regular schooling system. In the category of those who have never had prior education a small

percentage within this 38% belong to those children who for their age should have now been in the 5th standard or above. However due to immense poverty and lack of guidance many of them were denied the right to education. The BHAU-DIDEE project has ensured their participation also and the prerak didi has ensured continuity and regularity such that the drop out rates are relatively low.

Almost 75% of the children who discontinued their studies have done so in class 4 or lower standards. A large proportion of them (after interviewing them) admitted that they quit schooling due to certain situations such as poverty and migration. Some of them even worked as child labourers until the survey was conducted. Some worked from home to help their family to boost income and therefore failed to find a mention as child workers. There was a large proportion of children who had dropped out much earlier i.e forty eight percent. Almost 9.6% of children discontinued their schooling in standard eight and nine. the primary reasons for discontinuation of schooling amongst these children are the following- economically backward families who migrate in search of livelihoods, low awareness amongst parents and community members regarding the importance of schooling, multiple problems faced by the family that translates into psychological fear within the child to interact with other children of his/her age, language problem at school amongst others. What is pertinent to note here is that these children belong to families whose livelihood and income generation are embedded in the informal economic system in which income is not regular. In most cases the child has to help in income generation of the family either by working as a child labourer or helping cut down expenses by laboring at home or a family enterprise. The following statistics provides details of the communities that these children belong to and the extent of marginalization of these communities and families. In most cases such children need special care and training prior to and during regular schooling. They are emotionally and psychologically dependent unlike other children who have had regular schooling experience. Additionally it is a very difficult task for these children to continue education that they had quit a couple of years ago. The problems lie in adjustment and the demanding nature of the schooling practices. It is not uncommon to witness labeling and other such forms of excommunication of these children at schools and hence one of the priorities of BHAU or DIDEE is to ensure that they build up self confidence in these children. To achieve the desired goals the teachers or BHAU and DIDEE must be competent in child counseling also besides being having requisite academic skills. It was observed during the evaluation that the Prerak DIDEE who usually belongs to SHGs has the necessary 'experience and skills' to encourage and impress upon these children to regularly attend school and special classes organized by the project.

In eighty percent (80%) of the cases the families of such children earn less than Rs. 3000 a month. This amount is meager when one considers that these families reside in a city like Aurangabad. Much of the expenditure goes into food, housing and clothing. Moreover as the employment patterns have suggested that these workers do not have a guaranteed fixed income coming their way, instead their income graphs fluctuate according to their ability to find new jobs. This is usually true of workers in the informal sector. In such cases it is difficult to

forecast expenditure and plan for the future. Children in such families have to put in their labour and time to ensure the sustenance of the family. Schooling in such cases is not perceived to be practical. Additionally as mentioned earlier, parents of these children perceive such a formal education as not so useful in developing life skills of their wards. Instead they believe that the children should imbibe the traditional workmanship and skills that have been passed on for generations in their family. Of the total student population it was learnt that 50% of them belong to the Muslim community, 28% of them to the Hindu community (most of them from lower castes) and 2% to the Christian community. Another 20% of them belong to religious denominations such as Buddhists, Jains, Nomadic and Denotified Tribes and Tribes. Caste wise break-up among Hindus is as follows- 36 % of them belong to the scheduled caste including Mang, Matang, Chambar, Buddhist, Khatik, Rajput and Bhoi. Three percent (3%) belonging to the landless Marathas and 1% each belonging to Marwadi, Yadav and Beldar. Another two percent belonged to the Christian community. What is pertinent to note is that 6% of them intersperse with the Nomadic castes and Denotified tribes. Some of them did not even know which caste/tribe they belong and therefore it was left to our discretion to place them under these categories. All these communities are on the margins for a long time and this is due to the cyclic nature of disempowerment.

As is well recognised that statistical analysis has limitations in addressing questions related to 'experience', I wish to highlight through the following case studies the perceptions of various stakeholders of the utility and problems associated with the BHAU-DIDEE scheme.

Case Study- 1

It was while exploring and evaluating the project operation at the center located at CIDCO N-12 that our team came across this success story. Vaibhav Sachin Pund is a student of the Municipal school in the CIDCO area. He is presently studying in standard six. He belongs to a family that falls in the category of marginalized caste/community. He lost his mother when he was only three years old. On further enquiry it was learnt that she had died due to severe burns that she received due to a domestic accident. He has a younger brother who was only three months old when their mother expired. His father works as a labourer in the unorganized sector and therefore the family income is never certain. His grandmother (father's mother) tended both the children and continues to do so as the father has very little time to tend his children. They reside in a tin-shed house that is rented. A large part of the income is spent in payment of rent and for food. The overall surroundings and ambience of their residence is unfit for any healthy and developmental activity. Many a times the children were victims of health hazards and diseases. In this state of affairs, the family elders were under the misconception that it was impossible for Vaibhav to go to a regular school because they were extremely poor. Their misconception was that schooling meant fees, clothing (uniform), money to buy books and stationary, shoes, school bags, examination fess among a host of other such demands. As mentioned earlier their family income was so less that they could only just manage and in this situation educating children was thought to be an impossible task. And thus

Vaibhav did not attend school until he was spotted in the survey conducted by the BHAU-DIDEЕ project. By then he was already 10 to 11 years old. Initially he had immense desire and aspiration to be in school just like his compatriots. But overtime he lost that desire to be schooled and so did his father and grandmother. It was through persistent effort by the Bhau/Didi/Prerak didi that their efforts paid off. The father was convinced that he did not have to pay any money and that Vaibhav would be schooled free of cost and not only that, he would be admitted in the class that was analogous to his age i.e. Standard six. Additionally Vaibhav would also benefit from the mid-day meal scheme and he would be provided with services and materials such as free health checkups, free tuitions, counseling and books, stationary, uniform and other requisite material. The Bhau/Didi/Prerak didi specially played an important role in ensuring that Vaibhav felt comfortable in this whole process. They provided him with the required emotional support and in this way created the support base in the form of an extended family that was of utmost importance. He and his father were regularly counseled and today he is mainstreamed. The Bhau/didi has become an integral part of his family and they have also been successful in schooling his younger brother. He is now emotionally attached to the project staff and vice-versa.

Case Study- 2

Sohail Salim, 13 years of age, belongs to a family that is extremely poor and that has migrated from rural areas. His father works as a mechanic and mother is a house wife. As his family has been migrating he was never part of the schooling system. He helped his father in his occupation and at some point of time was also a child worker. In 2010 the municipal corporation school denied him admission to the respective standard as he did not possess a transfer certificate. Families from such migrating communities rarely have documents to supplement their citizenship claims. However according to the 2009 government resolution it was mandatory for all schools to incorporate such students. This was not done and Sohail and his family decided not to pursue the matter any further. He went back to helping his father in his business. It was only during the survey conducted by the BHAU-DIDEЕ project that he was found again and this time he was inducted into the regular schooling system. As he was working in a hazardous occupation, Sohail underwent free medical checkup. He was also treated for minor ailments and thankfully his family was advised not to employ him any further. The Bhau and Didi intervened at an appropriate time otherwise the fate of Sohail would have been worse. Further, his family and Sohail were continuously and regularly counseled on the importance of being a part of the formal educational system. He also availed of the benefits that were disbursed by the state and central government such as mid-day meal, free health checkups and mentoring. Today he is a regular 7th standard student at the municipal corporation schools and is doing well academically thanks to the timely intervention by the BHAU-DIDEЕ project intervention. He has also become emotionally close to the Bhau and didi of his center and interacts with them on a daily basis. He has come to realize the importance of education. What is more his father has now admitted Sohails' younger sister and brothers into regular school. They also regularly attend the tuitions that the BHAU-DIDEЕ project operates. This

space is very important for them because at home there is an absence of the necessary ambience for learning.

Case Study- 3

This is the case of six children from one family who were denied the right to education by their own parents. Alifa, Sumera, Abdul, Summaiya, Rani and Fareb (one boy and five girls) all brother and sisters resided in the slum area in a rented tin shed house. Their father is a habituated alcoholic and due to this he does not contribute in any way to the income generation of the household. Their mother and the children work as house maids and clean utensils and wash clothes. Earlier two of them were also garbage pickers who would sell their ware and get some income. It was during the survey that all these children were identified. Initially there was immense pressure on the children even to interact with the BHAU-DIDEЕ staff as the father was against such intrusion. He can become extremely violent and this has had its effect on the mind sets of the children too, though now it is being reversed through regular counseling and emotional guidance. Belonging to a marginalized family with very little income can be a very unhappy memory for the children. The cultural biases embedded in religious beliefs also can create a hurdle. Besides working as child labourers is thought to be useful by the parents as it accrues income to the family. It was a difficult task for the project staff to convince the parents that the children could still contribute to the family's income while taking their regular schooling lessons. Today all of them have been enrolled in the municipal school located at the police headquarters. Two of the children work in the morning and attend school and classes in the evening and the other three attend school in the morning and work in the evening. This arrangement has suited the family interests well. Additionally the children also benefit from the mid-day meal that they receive here. These children were malnourished and underweight before they were drawn into the project. Today they are much better off and also the regular health checkups have been very useful for them. More importantly they now look towards the Bhau and Didi as their extended family and also receive some monetary and other help in times of distress. The team has also tried to get the family some additional benefit available for such below poverty line families under the central and state government schemes.

Case Study- 4

This case highlights the cultural and dogmatic practices that especially estrange girls in our society. Krishna Manik Pawar is presently studying in 10th standard in the school located at Indira Nagar, Bajapur and is 16 years old. She was pressurized to get married when she was in the 7th standard. Though this is illegal the practice of child marriage is far more prevalent in certain communities across the country. Being a girl is thought to be a curse for the family and she has to get rid off before she reaches her puberty else she may elope and disgrace the family. This is the general sentiment that resonates in most communities that are on the margins. After marriage Krishna faced innumerable problems. Her husband turned out to be an alcoholic and so too was the case with the father in law. It was only the mother in law who was earning on a constant basis for the family as a maid servant and dish washer. Krishna

too had to join the same occupation soon after marriage and had to give up her education. It was not until the Bhau-Didee cell found her that she resumed her education and now she faces the board exams. She is very happy that she has some space wherein she can get out of the routine. Her didi though immense efforts and counseling has made her a stronger and independent individual.

Conclusion

The overall functioning of the BHAU-DIDEE project according to this research has been satisfactory and in some ways successful. The project management has been able to create to a certain extent a sense of ownership among its stake holders. The Prerak Didi, Bhau and Didi feel that they are an integral part of a mission that has set its objective as lowering the ratio of out of school children. The students and their parents also feel they are part of this programme. There are many instances not cited in the report wherein child workers were successfully converted into regular students.

One of the primary aims of the BHAU-DIDEE project is to ensure continuous assessment of that there is a high rate of attendance. However it was observed that the percentage of absenteeism is as high as 45%. This in a way contradicts the very purpose of this scheme. Though the dropout rates of students is low, absenteeism can occur due to several reasons which if not resolved can finally lead to dropout of the child from school. In the ongoing evaluation it was observed that the reasons for absenteeism ranged from lack of interest in school activities to lack of parental interest to labeling at school to investment of the child's labour in domestic chores and services.

It was also observed that the medium of instruction followed in the BHAU-DIDEE classes in some instances denied the child the necessary impetus to learn. For instance as observed the maximum number of children attending these classes belong to a community that has its mother tongue as Urdu, though some of them are adept at conversing in Marathi also. But in many of the instances during evaluation it was observed that a bilingual medium of instruction would have been more helpful. In regular State run schools it is usually a practice to impose State languages, but in special projects like the BHAU-DIDEE it would be advisable to impart lessons in a language in which the child is comfortable. The syllabus being imparted can also be devised in such a manner that the centers having students of only one community (such as the Muslim) can have references and illustrations that they can relate. After all the purpose of the project is to ensure that the students cover up the lost time and syllabus and to do so one must begin by introducing the subject/discipline in a learner friendly manner.

It was observed during the evaluation that the majority of staff employed at the centers was unaware of new developments in the field of education. Besides there were problems with respect to communication of these issues through a systematic channel. Some of the stake holders felt that their suggestions and complaints would go unheard. The capacity building programme would ensure that the Bhau and Didi are trained in maintenance of registers,

masters and also in documenting their work. This process of documentation enables policy making as subtle changes can only be drawn on from such reports. Development of bridge material/syllabus. Children enrolled at these centers are children who have discontinued schooling or have never been a part of it. This requires special that the administrator institute a system of training with suitable curriculum and syllabus so that the students will be taught in such a way to make mainstreaming process more effective. Maintaining of health cards should be made compulsory and failing to do so there should be provision of some form of accountability. National and State level health schemes should be considered as source of convergence with specific reference to health checkups of children at these centers. Regular medical checkups and health care services – tie-up with local NGOs and also with private partners can also be thought of as a way forward.

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