

Inspiration from abroad

INDIAN INSPIRATION

An alternative practice in children's education

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Dissatisfied with the dominant trends in children's education in rural India, a small group of social activists met towards the end of 1995 and came up with an idea to work on a new pedagogical approach that would help the children of the rural poor. The group consciously avoided the NGO model of work and did not seek to set up another school. Instead, it set up a community-based and volunteer-run organization centered around what they called Children's Activity Centers.

'Kaikala Chetana', the name of the organization, roughly translates as Kaikala Awareness – Kaikala being the original village from which the work has spread. At present, the village-based community group works with around 800 children in 24 locations within roughly a 20km radius of Kaikala village in the Haripal block of the Hooghly district in the Indian state of West Bengal, 50km from the city of Kolkata. The organization supports itself with contributions from villagers themselves, as well as donations from people in Kolkata and overseas. It is run by volunteers, some of whom receive occasional payments, the amount being decided collectively and depending upon personal circumstances and funds in store. However, unlike many NGOs, this project runs with very low costs in order to ensure its replicability from one village to the next.

Why was an alternative model needed?

Children from marginalized communities attend state schools, where they often face discrimination and negligence from the middle-class students and teachers. Over-crowded classrooms, a highly disproportionate teacher-student ratio, teacher absence, pressure of syllabus and exams and unattractive teaching negatively affect the children's education, especially poor children, in the state schools. They are not stimulated by the rote learning method and exam-oriented outcomes. The school system is moreover heavily bureaucratic and does not care to identify and address their needs. Attending schools becomes a formality for the rural poor; they learn very little and waste their time and energy. They cannot compete with the middle-class students, fail in exams, and many of them eventually drop out.

The government has set up more schools and introduced the Right to Education Act. The schools now have a mid-day meal program and better infrastructural facilities, and enrolment of the poor has increased. However, all this has had very little impact on the quality of teaching and learning in state schools. Conditions have not changed for poor children. The education system does not teach children to think. It does not teach them to develop their own initiative, to ask questions and look for answers, to work together, to develop a scientific attitude, to not be ashamed of themselves, and to have pride in their abilities. Poor children need these skills more than others because they will face a more difficult environment when they grow up. Strong political will and radical reform of the education system could make a difference, but the necessary changes are unlikely to come about in the present circumstances.

The group therefore realized the need for an alternative approach to educate and stimulate poor children, and it believed that communities can play a useful role in this.

What is an 'activity center'?

The core of Kaikala Chetana's work involves training the minds of village children and young people of poorer backgrounds through creativity, building confidence and instilling a love for learning. Chetana decided to have 'children's meeting points', which could be almost anywhere – a shaded plot of land,

a field, under a tree, next to a haystack. When it rains, these centers can move indoors into an empty room or the balcony of a village house.

There is no formal syllabus. Community volunteers tell stories, hold mime and puppet shows, teach dancing and craft, and organize activities that foster language skills, mathematics and science. They bring with them books and science equipment. They have health and environmental lessons, and put up exhibitions on science topics and children's artwork. In short, they do things that should have been done in school, but are usually not. All this happens in open spaces, in front of the community, so that local people get to see what is happening and can themselves decide to participate.

These centers are organized twice or occasionally thrice a week for two hours or so after school hours so that the children still have their playtime. Chetana now has a mobile library, taking books to villages. It has also worked in local brick kilns and state schools. It introduces its volunteers, who are drawn from marginalized communities, to pedagogic skills and thus enables them to bring this knowledge back to the rural poor, giving them ownership over their own activities. It has developed a cost-effective learning delivery system for the children of poor communities. For the children, there is the advantage of developing confidence, as well as thinking and problem-solving skills that should help them throughout their lives. The philosophy behind this work is to develop children who begin to think for themselves and behave differently, children who start to develop a social awareness. The volunteers believe that in the face of a rapidly shrinking job market and climate change, environmental adaptability and problem-solving skills should be the main focus of education in the coming days.



Why did the group start 'activity centers' rather than a 'model school'?

To set up a school, you need land, at least one building, overhead, maintenance, etc. A school will have to work through paid staff; nobody works in a school for free. That also adds to your costs. All these costs mean you will have to get sufficient and regular funding either from the government or from abroad – as in the case of most NGOs. It is difficult to sustain and spread this model, which may lead to fees being charged and the school becoming private. Children of the poor and especially the village poor cannot afford to pay for a private education. Moreover, it is unwise to compete with and weaken the state school system, which is all that the poor have in the end. Therefore, Kaikala Chetana decided to supplement, rather than compete with, the existing state-provided education system.

Outcomes

The working class now makes up the leadership of the work. Children become volunteers after a certain age. Most old centers are run and managed by third- or fourth-generation community volunteers. In the strong centers, the volunteers are thought of as leaders in the communities. The children are confident and happy to attend the centers. Parents realize that the model benefits their children. Communities strongly identify with and take pride in the work, which thrives on low cost and spreads at a modest pace. The model has the potential to stand out as a hope for the poor in the face of their

exclusion from an education system that is increasingly privatized, corporate and prohibitively expensive. Therefore, the organization's work not only helps them to compete in the rapidly changing world around them, but also fosters their social consciousness in the process.

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