**Why it is not someone else’s job?**

Education, a pedagogical process, can help all stakeholders: students, parents, teachers and eventually the community as well as the society at large, if it is approached holistically. At Kasturba Gandhi Girls Residential schools (KGBV) of Mahila Samakhya (MS), the task was to impart education while negotiating through a complex maze of socio-economic-cultural factors that hinder education. Historic oppressive walls of caste divisions were to be broken and the impact of economic inequalities had to be minimized. This was essential to put not only the kids but also their teachers, who came into the classroom divided by caste and class differences, on an equal playing field so that they could uniformly participate in the construction of knowledge and furthering their learning.

The MS was able to achieve this by recreating an equality-driven atmosphere and by continuously de-emphasizing the inequality-laden socio-economic-cultural inheritance. My field experience outlined below is from a collection of real-life experiences that led to a community of equal classroom opportunities.

Rashmi Sinha

Former State Project Director

Mahila Samakhya, Uttar Pradesh

“The school wall reads that work is worship. My mother picks up night soil every day. It smells. Is that worshiping too?” “In my village, I have seen some women going to temple in nice clothes and offering prayer and food to God. What is that? Never seen my mother doing it.”

Unwanted by everyone, underweight and fragile, less than 11 years of age, Mohini in 2006 had not only shaken me by her revealing questions but also she had challenged my understanding of her life experiences. She had questioned the relevance of all conventional moral teachings and quotes that were deeply embedded in my mind as truths from my schooling.

Mohini was seeking explanation for the humiliation that was normalized as “work” for her mother by the society. She was seeking explanation for the filth, the stench and the exclusion that her mother and her family were experiencing every day. She had questioned the rules created by a caste-divided, unequal and hypocritical society. She was demanding justice for her mother and her family.

The parents, unless mobilized by an external agency to seek admission for their children, never approached schools due to a fear of being snubbed and refused education. Even after the children were enrolled, the incidence of dropping out was extremely high for these children coming from such marginalized communities. The schools often practiced and perpetuated the same unjust, discriminatory caste-divisions and failed to provide nurturing learning environment, thus forcing these children to drop out soon after enrollment.

Equality, if not practiced with determination by all, may make school experience even worse for underprivileged children as they may be ostracized by their own “tola”. The KGBVs, which were run by the MS, a feminist organization, proactively tried to tackle these gaps in mainstream schooling through sociologically sensitive administration. The pedagogical approaches of MS evolved with challenges that rose everyday while engaging with community, parents, teachers and children from diverse backgrounds of deprivation. Mohini’s situation and the poignant question being one of them.

Mohini joined class sixth of Kasturba Gandhi Girls Residential school (KGBV) in Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. A residential school conjures up the image of a school with sprawling quadrangles and long corridors with lines of rooms opening up in pristine corridors. But this school had none of such features. It was one of the several KGBVs, that was opened by the MS under government’s minimally financed school education scheme to enable dropped out girls from marginalized communities and families living below the poverty line to complete their education up to class eighth.

Establishing a residential school at the block level and enrolling students with immediate effect was a daunting task. Persuading never-schooled, socially outcast and poor parents to send their adolescent daughters to a residential school was as challenging as trying to change socio-cultural landscape of a countryside overnight. These girls were supporting family livelihood too, therefore sending them out to school had a significantly high opportunity cost for the family. Persuasion required gaining confidence of the village men in the midst of their many social sanctions against girls and women. Equally difficult was finding women teachers, who would be willing to take the trouble of leaving their families to live and teach in remote residential rural schools.

The buildup of logistic readiness was also difficult. The probability of finding a building large enough to house a residential school for about a hundred girls and seven to eight staff members was absolutely negligible at the block level of any district. When we found a building with about four to five rooms at best, the number of toilets in such a building would rarely exceed one. Even the village houses of the richest landowners or block level government officers would rarely have more than one toilet. My experience suggests that the rural living is less individualized, therefore the rural architecture also produces more shared spaces than private ones.

Inadequacy of buildings at the local block level required finding a way of coping with this infrastructural challenge. We rented buildings with insufficient toilet facilities and established hygienic practices of toilet usage to ensure cleanliness and to help teachers and children maintain a healthy learning environment. The efforts were targeted towards keeping bathrooms and toilets dry, managing plenty of water in overhead tanks for bathing and toilet and helping girls to form hygienic toilet habits. In addition, emphasis was placed on the use of water with care and creation of a sense of rationing so that there was always enough water for everyone.

The task was simple. Keep the toilets clean, don’t leave them wet, slippery and smelly and think about how you would want to find it, if you were the next person to use it. But finding a socially just solution in an extremely complicated sociological setting was a serious business. All along this the budget was a huge constraint. The directives from the MS, Uttar Pradesh for school administration were clear and bold. No girl, teacher or staff should be asked to clean the toilets or sweep the floors. The job of the MS was to help each one of the school residents to reason out why no one should be a scavenger, outcast or brahmin in our schools and the community. It was like disrupting a deeply entrenched Hindu social order with its caste-based hierarchy and initiation of an anti-caste campaign to supplant the old order with a new democratic, equality driven, caste-free order.

“Why cleaning my mess should be my job and not assigned to someone else. Why toilets should be self-cleaned and left dry for others?” For some teachers and students from caste Hindu families the idea was unbearable. On the other hand, for many students this request to clean-up after using the toilets was natural with disturbingly submissive acceptance indicating that they were probably too deeply scared by an oppressive, caste-divided, inequality-laden socio-economic inheritance.

What social insecurity held us back for so long from self-questioning and doing away with the practice of cleaning up after ourselves? Why someone else should clean someone else’s excrement? Is it work? And if it is not work then what is it? Violence? Is it caste-based exploitation, indignity, humiliation, dehumanization of the scavenger, or dehumanization of the producer of excrement or dehumanization of both? “The thought never occurred,” exclaimed one teacher.

Surely, the question of Mohini had stirred the thought process in the school’s teaching community. Why her mother’s work was not worship? Why her mother and she couldn’t be anywhere near those temples and temple-going women?

And if at all children like Mohini, in an unequal, hierarchical and oppressive society such as ours, be ever flooded with a barrage of good quotes of conventional wisdom, such as, “To love is to serve” or “Work is worship.” With this insight, the next goal post for the school curriculum became clear:

What is work?

What is worship?

What is exploitation?

Helping the child to understand that her mother’s “work” was not worship seemed more difficult than cracking any logistic or bureaucratic problem faced so far in my life.

With an openness to questioning ourselves based on what we were hearing from the students, the silences started breaking and the minds started questioning. The fears in the minds of many girls soon found their voice in our schools:

Why is it my mother’s job only?

Why my mother doesn’t offer prayers like other women in the temple?

Why it is my job alone?

Why suddenly these questions at all?

And why it is your job, my job and everyone’s job to clean up after oneself?

The schools and its administration were working overtime questioning every perception to unlearn and help others unlearn many undesirable hierarchical behaviors of the upper castes and not to misuse the total subservience that the children had acquired during their process of socialization. No opportunity to break such taboos was too small. When Mohini’s mother was hired to cook mid-day meals, it became even more urgent and pressing for the MS to prepare schools and the village community to accept it. This was the most testing time for the entire MS organization.

As we discussed the oppressive caste structure, untouchability, women oppression, land ownership, menstruation and purity, power dynamics, health, sanitation, cleanliness, the girls started recognizing forms of discrimination inflicted upon them and their families. They shared horrid stories of their oppression. In the evening sessions we endlessly deliberated on the stories of Gandhi, Kasturba and B.R. Ambedkar’s life experience. Often it appeared that there was little actual change in sight. But gradually the feminist energy began surfacing, the vehemence among the teachers, majority of whom came from upper castes, started fading. New ideas and resolutions started to evolve.

As a result of the practices that we had established, things started to fall in place and we were able to get the schools functioning by 8:30 AM. The girls and the teachers would work in coordination using bath and toilet facility, cleaning and drying it and then handing it over as a team to the next group. Often due to lack of drainage, we collected the waste water in a pit or pond. This waste water was recycled for watering of flower and vegetable beds. The guiding principle was never to compel anyone to do anything under our belief that eventually everyone would realize the need to care for each other and live in equality.

An indicator of our success was that the local caste-based electoral politics would sometimes become threatened and cause serious disruptions in schools. Dealing with such disruptions was a constant struggle. In the midst of all this, the girls were continuing to master crafts, such as, plumbing, machine repairs, use of Neem, Phenol and lime powder. The girls would always find some new idea for experimentation as well as a reason to celebrate. How devices that clean should be kept clean, how to make brooms more effective, how air pressure can be increased in cisterns to minimize water requirements. They were turning problems into topics of their discussion and innovation. All problems, were they social or mechanical, ultimately landed up in the community of teachers, parents and children to be researched, deliberated and solved.

Hundreds of teachers and school staff across 32 KGBVs, initially offended by the mere idea of self-cleaning of toilets, had seen their views respectfully challenged in the light of reason, equality and fairness. The MS driven teacher development programmes were supporting them to understand and adjust to more equal settings. More than 3,200 girls, when they went back home during vacations, were using the same benchmarks to help their parents manage their surroundings.

Similarly, the Swachha Bharat Campaign, while building toilets and creating infrastructure for Clean India, needs to effectively manage psychological and sociological underpinnings required to achieve success and sustainability across all its dimensions. The campaign needs to invest in people, their education and experiences that will produce desirable social changes needed to make India Clean and keep it clean. Above all, governments need to invest in schools and curriculum based on understanding of sociological processes that enable children from different groups of society to complete education with dignity and lead creation of a culture of equality and justice.