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Open school for Bhopal's slum children

Arambh has taken up the challenge of getting Bhopal's slum children to return to school. Scores of children attend its centres to study and re-enter the education system, at timings that best suit them, especially if they are working

Why do children drop out of school? Do they drop out because of poverty, family problems, or lack of awareness among parents?

While all these reasons are valid, there's one that's not often recognised: an unsuitable school environment. Can a young girl be expected to want to attend school if her school does not have a separate girls' toilet?

Says Archana Sahay, a Bhopal-based social activist who has been working in the area of child labour: "More children than we would like to believe drop out of school simply because they are not happy at school. While middle- and upper-class parents push and cajole their children to study even if they don't like studying, working-class parents who do not have the requisite time, skills or economic prowess to find solutions give up easily. And eventually, the children find their way into the workforce."

It is with this aspect of child labour in mind that Sahay and PACS Programme partner Arambh have taken up the challenge of getting Bhopal's slum children to go back to school. The Poorest Areas Civil Society Programme (PACS), spread over six states and 108 of India's poorest districts, helps build the capacities of the poor, enabling them to fight for their rights and entitlements.

Since Sahay and her team began work in 2000 (first through a Unicef project and then in collaboration with Catholic Relief Services), a large number of slum children who had dropped out of school and gone to work have found their way back into the education system.

We are at the Arambh multipurpose centre in the Hatha Sikandarquli slum area. Shashi Devi, an Arambh field worker who runs the centre, sits at a low desk bent over a notebook that's being held out by a shy-looking girl of around nine. On a rug on the floor are a dozen other children, all surprisingly clean and healthy-looking. Some are busy writing in their exercise books; others are looking through picture books, playing with toys, or

cutting patterns out of paper. “We help them do their homework here,” Devi explains.

When Arambh first started working with child labour, its approach was to communicate with the employers. “The employers were very defensive and would not let us talk to the children,” says Parveen Jahan who runs a centre similar to Devi’s centre in the Aishbagh area of the city. “When we started our centre, children would come to it only on holidays. Gradually, we began meeting parents and communicating directly with the children. The parents were interested, but they insisted that their children ‘did not have brains,’ or were ‘not interested in studies’. Over a period of time, the children started visiting the centre out of curiosity. And most of them decided to stay.”

Out of a total of 117 children who visit Jahan’s centre, 31 were admitted to school in the academic year 2003-04, while 22 were admitted the following year. The centre also helped some of the older children appear for private examinations. Many of them have decided to continue their studies.

The Arambh centres have a flexible schedule, and there are no fixed hours. They stay open from morning until evening, and the children come and go whenever they have time. For instance Rashida, a shy bright-eyed child, goes to school in the morning, comes to the centre at noon and stays on till evening, unless there is *adde ka kaam* (*zardozi* work, which comes in batches with gaps in between) when she has to stay home after school to help her mother. Sikandar and Munavvar, aged 12 and 13 respectively, work as mechanics’ assistants and can come in for only two hours a day with the permission of their employers.

This is another unique aspect to Arambh’s approach -- the accent is on getting children back into studies, not out of work. A sizeable number of the 43 children attending Shashi Devi’s centre still work. Devi says: “The boys mostly work as mechanics’ assistants, in restaurants, factories or shops. The girls usually work at home with their mothers, doing *zardozi* work (Bhopal, with its large Muslim population, is well-known for this art). Some also work at *bidi*-making.”

“It is neither always possible nor fair to take the children out of work,” explains Sahay. “Many children work because adult members of the household are sick, or there are large families to support.” So, Arambh focuses on remedial measures.

The Arambh team conducts regular follow-ups with both parents and employers. Employers are counselled against beating or abusing the children, or overworking them. “We also insist that they call the children by their actual names, not by words like *chotu*,” says Jahan. “This has a tremendous impact on the child’s self-image.”

Arambh also follows-up with schools. For children to stay in school it is crucial that the atmosphere in school is improved. Field

workers from Arambh talk to the teachers, sensitising them about the children's background and keeping a regular watch on children admitted so that the teachers do not take them for granted. "In government schools, teachers can be very insensitive, even violent, especially with poor students whose parents do not have the power to question them," says Shashi Devi. "We play the role of parents for these children in their schools. Apart from sensitising the teachers, this also sends a powerful message that there is someone who is keeping an eye on the child. So the teachers are careful about how they treat the child."

In an attempt to build bridges between schools and parents, Arambh has taken some unusual steps. "Once, with the dual aim of generating awareness about nutritious food among mothers and also of bringing schools and parents together, we organised a nutritious food contest for mothers at a school. The response, both from mothers and teachers, was tremendous," says Sahay. Thanks to Arambh's efforts, schools have begun improving. Only recently, Hamidiya School, which has admitted a large number of Arambh's children, organised its first-ever annual function. The school had no money to organise the event, so members of Arambh invited the headmistress to attend a meeting between the community and the corporator, and ask for funds. Not only did the school get the required money for the event but the principal received firsthand experience about the circumstances in which the children live.

Concern about the health of these children inspired Arambh to take up a water and sanitation project with the civil society organisation Wateraid. Successful implementation of Wateraid's hand-washing campaign, the creation of WATSAN (water and sanitation) committees in the slums, and regular awareness campaigns on the importance of hygiene have all played a vital role in improving the health of children in these communities. Badrunnisa Bi, a resident of the Aishbagh area, says: "Since the drains in our area were cleaned and proper water arrangements made our children are falling sick less frequently."

Today, most of the children in the six slums where Arambh runs its centres attend school regularly. Those who are not in school receive an informal education at the Arambh centres. "At one time parents used to complain that their children do not want to study," says Parveen Jahan. "Now the same parents tell us that their children study by candlelight when there is no electricity."

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