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ABSTRACT FOR PAPER

Title: Bridging the Social Divide through Inclusive Education- Strengthening Quality Education in the Mewat Region, India

Abstract:

Issue: Implementation of appropriate model of education among girl children (6-14 years) in a religious community, having restricted access to basic education. Meo inhabitants of Mewat are a marginalized community from Haryana and Rajasthan states. They have unique religious culture with lowest female literacy rates.

Description: The community and religious leaders were sensitized on the importance of education. Gender issues were addressed in local context promoting unique pedagogy and curriculum. Girl education and their mainstreaming into government schools were promoted through Quality Education Centers. The government adopted SARD innovative methods and placed its teachers to train the teachers and members of the *madarasas* in different clusters. On seeing this success, the government proactively replicated the initiatives.

Next Steps: Mewat initiatives targeting girl children ensures their transition from primary to elementary schools. Focus will be on expanding QEC's and Stakeholder Forums to facilitate the process, including enhancing participation of local religious leaders.

BRIDGING THE SOCIAL DIVIDE THROUGH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION- STRENGTHENING QUALITY EDUCATION IN THE MEWAT REGION, INDIA

The Mewat Region, spanning from Rajasthan to Western Haryana is one of the most under-developed regions of India. The area is unique due to its Meo-Muslim Community; Rajput Hindus who converted to Islam in the 16th century. The meo-community blends both Islamic and Hindu religious practices. On the one hand, Meos claim to be Muslims, tracing their conversion to various Sufi saints who began settling in their territory from the eleventh century onwards. On the other hand, they also claim to be Rajputs, and believe that they are direct descendants of Lord Krishna and Rama. Today, the Meo's live in abject poverty and are severely marginalized; one of the main reasons being their mixed religious heritage.

Access to education in Mewat has been a major problem, especially for girls. Female literacy is closely associated with reduction in fertility rates and population growth. There were several factors that led to the poor state of education in the meo-muslim community. A detailed baseline survey conducted by SARD in the Mewat region indicated that there was a lack of opportunities as well as the inability of existing avenues to retain the interest of children. Thus, it has kept a number of children out of schools. This survey, using quantitative and qualitative indicators, clearly brought to light the educational backwardness of the people in this region. The community's attitudes towards education of the girl child, especially, the belief that religious education in the madrasas was sufficient led to further alienation of girls from mainstream education. Lack of female teachers, teacher-student ratios up to 1: 150 in some cases, as well as irregular functioning of existing schools further exacerbates the scenario.

Education levels of children and their participation, especially girls are very low. Female literacy in this region is among the lowest; 29% of girls in the age group of 6-14 years. Villages often only have one or two schools with inadequate infrastructure within the village to support girl child education. Education is often looked upon with fear by children because teachers are ill equipped with the necessary skill set to facilitate learning with the children and often resort to violence as a means of enforcing obedience. Most parents therefore view schooling with apprehension and the children itself prefers to stay out of school in order to avoid corporal punishment. Most of the religious leaders are not supportive of educating girls at a higher level. The community being economically deprived of employable opportunities has resorted to exploiting children. Children start working at an early age in stone quarries / mines or agriculture fields as labourers. One of the major reasons for high child drop-out is because of rampant child labour use in the region.

In the Mewat region, families typically consist of 5 to 6 children where the elder child is responsible for the care of their siblings and contributing to the household activities. The situation is further complicated by the belief by the Meo's that girls

in particular should give priority to raising their younger siblings and participating in household chores. Families also give preference to sending the male child to school. In particular, local madrasas (religious centers of learning) are promoted to girls instead of formal educational centers. In *madrasas*, the main form of teaching is practiced through Urdu and only religious education of the Qu'ran is promoted by the *moulavis* or religious teachers. There is no encouragement of use in modern forms of teaching and girls are encouraged to marry early. Furthermore, there is a predominant belief amongst the *moulavis* that girl education and additional forms of teaching are not in fact beneficial to the overall development of the girl child. Early marriage is again another contributing factor influencing the low literacy rates especially among the girl child.

Net enrolment rates in Mewat show high drop-out levels for both boys and girls as students reach the age of 14. Drop-out is affected by a number of factors, including a lack of trained teachers, particularly female teachers in remote areas, a lack of appropriate content and quality of education for girls. The lack of a female teacher in the Mewat region further reduces the possibility of educating the girl child; as parents are often vary to send their daughter 2 km away to be educated. Furthermore, education in Urdu is demanded by most of the community leaders and is a barrier for preventing child education beyond the primary level. In government schools Hindi remains the primary form of education.

Transition from primary to lower secondary school, particularly in Mewat region, is problematic. Although strategies exist to address problem, including government schools, the majority of rural girls continue to be deprived of upper-primary education because neither solution meets the cultural norms acceptable for girls.

THE GOVERNMENT APPROACH TO SCHOOLING

The government primary school system provides for eight years of compulsory schooling between the ages of 6 and 14 years. In primary schools, there is overcrowding, sometimes accompanied by dilapidated school facilities. Management remains strongly autocratic and does not allow the voice of the community and school teachers in the decision making process. At the same time, denominational management is becoming less supportive of their schools financially, at a time when the government is faced with having to engage in stringent budgetary adjustment policies. A relatively large number of the teachers who staff the schools are still not graduates of a full course of teacher training. Often these teachers are high school graduates and do not have any further specialized training. There has not been any satisfactory curriculum development programme in the schools. Similarly, there have not been sufficient textbooks and teaching/learning materials, and the pupils who sit for their exams perform poorly.

The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 recognized that the schools could not reach all children and a large and systematic programme of non formal education would be required for school dropouts, for children from habitations without schools, working children and girls who could not attend whole day schools. Thus, NPE became an important component of the overall strategy for achievement of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE). The NPE scheme was revised in 1987-88. While the focus continued to be on 10 educationally backward states, but it also included urban slums, hilly, tribal and desert areas and projects for working children in other states and Union Territories (UT's) as well.

Several evaluations and assessments by state governments, institutions and most notably the Programme Evaluation Organization (PEO) of the Planning Commission have indicated that the implementation of the Scheme has not been satisfactory. This is true for Mewat Region too. The PEO's findings were:-

- Insufficient involvement of the local community, the Village Education Committees (VECs) and the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).
- The absence of linkages for entry at different levels into formal schools and for tie-ups with the National Open School.
- The notion that the alternative system is inferior, second-rate and second-grade, both qualitatively and quantitatively.
- Insufficient decentralization of administrative and financial powers.
- Insufficient flexibility.
- NFE needs to recognize that different children's groups have different educational needs and modify itself accordingly.
- Lack of success with girls.
- The attendance at girls' centers and the number of women functionaries in the programme has been noticeably low.
- Low overall coverage of the scheme.
- It covers less than 10% of the out of school children.
- Delay in release of funds at all levels.
- Poor completion rates for the primary level by children studying NFE centres.
- Very low transition rates to the formal system.

The latest Household Poverty Survey conducted by SARD revealed a high incidence of poverty in the Mewat Region, with an increasing proportion of the population living below the poverty line over the past decade. The elimination of poverty and progress towards sustainable development will only take place with increased and improved levels of education. The commitment of the government to this end has been reaffirmed on many occasions but for Mewat's poorest people, "Education for All" remains a daunting challenge but not insurmountable.

While it is acknowledged that there has been considerable access in primary education, it should be noted that such expansion has been in favour of boys due to the worrisome drops in enrolment for girls in pre-school education. Hence, to attain universal basic education by 2015, and maintain the enrolment rates in upper primary, additional school places in upper-primary schools will have to be created at an accelerated pace, with a special focus on the inclusion of the girl child in schools.

SARD'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE MEWAT

In the last thirteen years, the Society for All Round Development (SARD) has been working with the Government of Rajasthan with primary school teachers to provide quality education to children, with a particular focus on the girl child. SARD works with many schools that attempt to provide quality holistic education to children from poor economic backgrounds. These schools come under a special category called 'Alternative Education' schools (SSA) because they seek to explore different alternatives in education. Such schools continue to encourage the spirit of enquiry in a child and help them make their choices based on nurturing the child's interest and learning. A lot of importance is given to the child's psychology at an early age so that they loose the psychological fears or complexes they may have towards learning. This encourages children to think independently and become more responsible. Most of these schools are engaged in creating and using innovative teaching methodologies that ensure that rote learning does not happen. As an example - some schools have developed excellent language teaching methodologies. Others may use creative games and experiments to explain difficult concepts in Math or Science. Some schools have changed the class room structure to encourage better children and teachers interaction. Such creativity is typically missing in the conventional education stream practiced by majority of schools in Mewat.

To increase the level of girl education within the Mewat community, SARD initially began by promoting the involvement of the community within the educational programs. SARD officers approached the *Panchayat* (village government) to gain their approval in increasing the educational levels of the girl child. Education began one of the main topics of regular interest during Panchyati meetings and discussion was also focused on increasing attendance levels of girls, enrollment and gradually the notion of education of female children became accepted.

The formation of Parent Teacher Associations (PTC) was instrumental in increasing the involvement of women in the education process. Most women in the region often questioned the motivation for education their daughters, viewing a very little need for it. Women in the Mewat region were actively solicited and the argument placed forth to mothers, that with higher levels of education, the girl would be better able to provide for her families over all welfare in terms of basic health, nutrition and life skills development, allowing for the overall education of

the family. These forums quickly became a popular venue for women to interact with teachers and ask about the progress of their children, an opportunity that was never presented earlier. Through the establishment of Parent Teacher Associations, women are empowered to facilitate change and take an active role in their children's education.

SARD quickly identified the importance of having the support of the religious community in the education of the girl child. SARD engaged in regular dialogues with the moulavis, in an attempt to raise the education level of children in the region. Urdu was also integrated within the SARD educational initiative and school timings were made flexible allowing the girl child to both receive their religious education as well as gain the benefits of attending regular schooling. Currently, the SARD quality education centers are supported by 20 madrasas in the Mewat region and by the Rajasthan Board of Madrasas.

FORMATION OF QUALITY EDUCATION CENTERS

With the overwhelming support of the Mewat community, SARD has been able to set up *Hamara Talim Garh's* or "Our learning centers". These quality education centers work to mainstream schooling for the girl child with the government schools. SARD education centers provide full time schools for children with the syllabus prescribed by the government. These schools are typically located in the Mewat region where no other form of schooling is currently available. The children attending these schools pay little or no fees. SARD has helped support the financial needs for schools including school infrastructure, educational materials, and teacher's training.

QEC's are typically created for children who are unable to attend an entire day of school. Often these centers serve as a stepping stone to more formal education. Children can join irrespective of their age. There are bridge schools that offer several years of curriculum in a condensed manner to help children join a formal education system. The curriculum is based on the use of state textbooks which allow for the mainstreaming of children into a formal education system. Most importantly, teacher learning materials specifically designed to address the local learning context of the Mewat region is used to facilitate learning and reflects the lifestyle and environment of Meo-muslim students. A combination of worksheets, flashcards, and subject based charts and story books indigenous to the Mewat way of life are used to promote education.

Balika Shivirs (girl assemblies) are also organized on every first and third week of the month to develop leadership ability and to provide girls with the opportunity to improve their oratorical skills through role play or story telling activities. Exposure visits to places of historical importance and the participation in local fairs and festivals are also included to add value to their learning experience and allow girls to enjoy a bit of their childhood, otherwise lost in the completion of their daily chores. In addition, SARD has encouraged the formation of child protection

centers where children can report any incidences of violence thus, increase trust within the education center system. SARD hopes to eventually form a federation for children amongst various districts within in the Mewat Region. The hope is to increase their self confidence and give them a platform to communicate with the local panchyats (self governments)

A multi –group approach to teaching and learning is taken where students are divided into groups and further sub divided on a subject basis. Focus is placed on mathematics and languages and learning remains self paced. Learning is often facilitated through activity oriented tasks in an environment free from corporal punishment. Furthermore, school timings are kept flexible allowing children to receive education from both *madrasas* as well as the SARD Quality Education Centers. One of the outcomes that girls in the community have taken a pride in, is the fact that through their learning of math at Quality Education Centers, they are able to keep “hisab-kitab” or budgeting and are able to teach other younger children in their village thus, empowering the overall role of women in the villages.

SARD has a strong group of teacher resources in Mewat who are involved in Education provided at these centers is based on empowerment by imbibing the spirit of cooperation instead of competition. Quality Education Centers have been established by SARD to provide full time school to children living in remote regions where there is no other form of schooling present. Children attending do not have to pay school fees and can be mainstreamed into formal government schools once they have passed the primary level. SARD has helped support the financial needs for school by providing a school infrastructure, educational materials, teachers training and other requirements.

TEACHER TRAINING ON SARD PEDAGOGY

To further increase the comfort level of girls attending education centers, SARD considers teacher training to be a vital part of the program. A considerable emphasis was placed on the recruitment of female teachers (in addition to male teachers) from the local community. The strategy to recruit local teachers was promoted as local teachers would be sensitive to the community values and the social and cultural constraints within in the community. Recruiting of female teachers helped developed a bond of trust and was a confidence measure. Completing an adequate programme of teacher training is necessary for teachers to acquire fundamental principles and techniques of teaching.

SARD has also introduced a mobile system of teaching in its Quality Education Centers. This system allows teachers from the community to rotate through various quality education centers within the community. It allows for the teacher to familiarize themselves with all the centers and share and the same time, children are exposed to a variety of teachers with specialized knowledge in various subjects. The system allows a break in monotony of teachers and gives

them an opportunity to apply and develop innovative methods to encourage learning. In spite of the overall benefit of the mobile system, there have been some obstacles to the implementation of a mobile system of teaching as teachers find it hard to establish a rapport with their students and rotation has been reduced to two centers in an effort to improve the mobile system rather than the original three per week.

SARD research has provided evidence that teachers were aware of the educational value of the child-centered approaches to teaching and the need to appeal to the interests of their pupils. They also understood that the different content areas require different methods of teaching and that, generally, children must be given every opportunity to participate in their own learning through activities which allow them to investigate and observe. It was with the foregoing stated issues of teaching and learning in mind that the SARD set out to contribute to a restructured programme of teacher training, aimed at improving the competency of primary school teachers as well as to increasing the proportion of trained teachers in the primary school system.

Several factors contribute to effective teaching which, by extension, result in meaningful learning on the part of the pupils. They include: (a) the children themselves, who are usually heterogeneous in terms of maturity, intellectual capacity, and socio-economic backgrounds; (b) the teaching skills and interest of the teacher; (c) time management; (d) space and other physical facilities; (e) the curriculum; (f) learning materials; and (g) the general support provided for the teacher by the school and the wider community. The experience of SARD interventions in Mewat indicate that these factors have not been contributing strongly to the quality of teaching in the schools.

Currently traditional lecture methods, in which teachers talk and students listen, dominate most classrooms. The common obstacles to the employment of innovative methods of teaching as found out by SARD are: the tradition of teaching and child upbringing, lack of institutional support, and learning resources, teachers' lack of expertise, inappropriate curricular materials and students' lack of prior experience to actively participate in the teaching and learning process. Instead of traditional 'chalk-and talk' teaching to 'open-ended' instruction, SARD has recommended structured teaching – a combination of direct instruction, guided practice and independent learning, integrating lecture with interactive teaching, re-writing the curricular materials, re-training teachers, and improving the provision of learning resources.

As a result, at Quality Education Centers, serve as a source for teachers themselves to explore ideas related to pedagogy. Resource centers serve as a focal point for disseminating information and training impacting the quality of schooling experience.

CONTINUING EFFORTS

As part of the on going efforts, SARD along with its partners, in addition to continue to work in the following avenues:

- Prepare Child Friendly School processes in the existing project schools (government and non-government), so that these schools undertake change for other schools within the block of Mewat districts by improving teaching principles and practices becomes sustainable.
- Develop and implement an effective model of child friendly schools in the Mewat districts whereby government and non-government primary and upper-primary school development courses for various grades, not only for its own students, but also for 'drop-outs' and bridge them, bring them to primary / upper-primary schools.
- Create and build state-of-art capacity for individuals and schools engaged in training and development activities in the field of education leading to informed advocacy and dynamic change in the school education sector.
- Develop the SARD approach into an educational development centre to enable it to respond to the emerging needs of upper-primary education.

The focus of the on going project work is to ensure that school remain child-friendly. The child should have the right to be curious, to ask questions, and receive answers, to argue and disagree, to test and make mistakes, to know and not to know, to create and be spontaneous, to be recognized and respected. SARD, together with other international and national organizations, considers Child Friendly School (CFS) as an important starting point for democratization of the education systems.

FOR SARD, A CHILD FRIENDLY SCHOOL MEANS:

- **It is an evaluated school:** Continually identifies the excluded children, so as to get them back to school and include them in learning. In particular focus is placed on the inclusion of the girl child into education. The school achieves this by establishing parent-community-school "monitoring committees" that will be responsible for a) school mapping to identify every household in the school's catchment area by age, by gender and by other characteristics, b) close follow up of children who may be at risk of faltering, drop out, and low attendance, c) preparing needs assessment reports to be submitted to the **parent-teachers committees** and to the district level planning.
- **It is a child-centered school** that is acting in the **best interest of the child**, realization of child's full potential, concerned about the "whole" child, and with what happens to children before and after the school.

• **It is an environment of good *quality education*** that is a) inclusive of **ALL** children-girls, disabled, minorities, b) effective with children: interactive, participatory learning processes, relevant content, centered on learner, and with skilled teacher, c) Healthy and protective of children, d) Gender-sensitive, e) Involved with children, families and communities.

• **It promotes school-based Governance:** It is an elaboration of decentralized, school-based management which can help to; a) bring decision-making about the school to where decisions make a real difference. b) encourage local innovations, c) increase the relevance and flexibility of education to local conditions and needs, d) increase accountability for the provision and quality of education delivered through the school: e) stimulate participation in, and a sense of ownership of, the school by its various community partners; and f) generate a stronger local demand and more resources for education.

FUTURE INTERVENTIONS

SARD, with the Government of Rajasthan hopes to expand the QEC intervention to the upper primary level as well. Interventions in the project hope to support the following three broad kinds of strategies:

- Continue running QECs in school-less habitations
- Interventions for mainstreaming of 'out of school' children Vis a Vis bridge courses, back to school camps etc.
- Strategies for very specific, difficult groups of children who cannot be mainstreamed.

The system of pre-education education provided at the QEC is based on the following approach:

- The most important aspect of the approach is attitude of the teacher, which should be that learning is a form of play which fosters the blossoming of the child's natural development. Learning should and can be made interesting, enjoyable, most importantly- FUN.
- A large portion of the teaching materials are produced at the school by the teachers, who customize their teaching aids to suit the interests and knowledge levels of the students.
- Children learn spontaneously when their interest and curiosity are awakened. 'Teaching' is confined to brief periods according to the natural attention span of each child, which is normally 15-30 minutes daily during the first two years. It is never extended beyond the child's span of interest.
- The student-teacher ratio is kept very low to enable the teacher to work with small groups of 4-5 children at a time while the others are absorbed in learning games or recreational play. The most effective ratio is five students per teacher during pre-school. However, since the teaching methods are intense, each student actually need attend only 2½ to 3 hours of class per

day, enabling each teacher to effectively handle double the number of students.

- The act of teaching consists primarily of presenting sensory images, objects and information to the child in a pleasant and interesting manner and permitting the child to observe and inquire about the subject, without compelling the child to memorize. Coloured flash cards with large images are utilized as convenient, low cost teaching aids.
- Rapid acquisition of basic reading and verbal skills in multiple languages occurs naturally by exposing the child to whole words as objects repetitively for very brief periods. In this manner at a young age even children of illiterate parents learn several languages as effortlessly as they normally learn to speak their native tongue.
- Story telling is used to make learning fun and to communicate basic values of goodness, beauty, harmony, responsibility and right conduct.
- Information on people and other living things, places, history, geography, and other cultures are presented to the child in the form of stories, pictorial information and explanations combined together to present facts in a living, integrated context rather than as a series of separate divorced subjects.
- Rapid acquisition of basic math skills is achieved through the use of number line method which enables the child to physically experiment and act out different combinations of addition and subtraction.

The aim of the programme is to outline effective strategies by which the education system practiced at QEC can be tested and extended to other parts of Mewat (Project area).

- The tried and tested work of the SARD QEC would be extended up to the fifth standard over the next four years to demonstrate that even disadvantaged children from rural families can acquire educational levels normally.
- A Teacher Resource Centre will be established to train teachers and trainers in the methods employed at the school, so that those trained can serve as a nucleus for establishing new schools and as a means of inducting these teaching methods into existing schools.
- It is essential to build public awareness and acceptance of this approach to early child education, so that existing schools will be willing to experiment with the new methods. This can be achieved through a combination of media educational programmes and demonstration projects carried out in established schools around the country.
- The special teaching and course material employed by these methods must be reproduced on a sufficiently large and economical scale to support widespread dissemination.

ANNEX: A DAY IN TAALIMGHAR- QUALITY EDUCATION CENTER

The day begins as early as 8:30 am in the morning. One finds children traveling long distances by foot where they spend around four to four and a half hours at the educational center. Their day starts with the cleaning up and setting up of activities, a task focusing on team work. This often involves chores such as sweeping, dusting of mats, putting up charts; an exercise important for creating a sense of ownership for their school. This is group is followed by an activity called "Vatavaran Nirman" or environment building. For another half hour, children are engaged in a variety of different activities such as singing, reciting poems, engaging in group discussions. This is done to enable them to psychologically leave behind the worries of home and focus in on their day at school. The next hour is spent in subject based learning at a multi group level. The subject maybe either math or language depending on the mobile teacher visiting their center. Once a week on Saturdays, in the last hours, a children's assembly is held where activities are promoted on a competitive level to enhance their skill set along with the appropriate teaching learning materials- content specific, competency based material suited for the learning pace of the child.

AYUB'S STORY- SUCCESS OF COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Ayub is an active member of a CBO in Padla Village in the Mewat Region, who supports QEC teachers in their work. One day, Ayub reached the QEC in Padla and an associate teacher informed Ayub that two sisters, Sanjeeda and Apseena had not been attending QEC for many days. The teacher informed Ayub that when he went to the home to inquire about their absence, the girls mothers had informed him that her husband had forbade the girls to attend school since all they did was sing and dance.

Since Sanjeeda and Apseena were Ayub's nieces, Ayub reached his brother's house later on and informed the family that studies were occurring at the centers. Ayub invited his skeptical brother to the center to witness the improvements shown by the girls at the center. Upon showing his brother the girls progress reports as well as their art and toys made of clay as well as asking the girls to show him their ability to count, add and subtract figures, Ayub's brother proclaimed astonishment. Since, then neither Sanjeeda nor Apseena have missed a day of school. Timely interventions such as Ayub's have allowed girls to continue their participation in education centers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mr. Sudhir Bhatnagar is the General Secretary of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of the Society for All Round Development. He began his career with the Indian Red Cross, where he worked for 11 years in the areas of Training, Relief, Medical Aid and Education. Subsequently, he worked at WAFD for 3 years as Programme Officer in Bharatpur District (Rajasthan), where he became familiar with the development needs of rural populations in the district. . Since many years, he has been working as the CEO of SARD. Mr. Bhatnagar has been instrumental in gaining the trust of the *moulavis* in the Mewat region, and also accept the establishment of quality education centers. In partnership with IMPACT, Reach India and Aga Khan Foundation, he has been able to advocate the education of the girl child in the region. He has been awarded many meritorious and appreciation awards by different dignitaries including Noble laureate for Peace, Governors and Chief Ministers. Because of his meritorious work, he was awarded Dinesh Medal by Lt. Governor of Delhi in 1995.

During his tenure in SARD, he has been able to establish long term relationship and commitment by variety of donors including European Commission through Aga Khan Foundation, OXFAM-GB, USAID through Reach India and Family Health International, CARE, the Government of Rajasthan as well as donors from the corporate sector including Hero- Honda, Reliance, BILT and ITC. The Society For All Round Development has always been holistic in its outlook on development, an approach followed by the CEO in his every day activities in Northern India.