DEVELOPING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

"LIBERATE SCHOOL"

A case study

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PREFACE

Education for All (EFA) is the goal that the partners who met at the World Education Forum in Dakar in April 2000 are aiming for. The existing figures – 862 million adult illiterates, out of which two-thirds are women and 113 million children who are not enrolled in school – resume the present situation and the enormous challenges to be met in order to achieve this goal.

The Dakar Framework for Action states that education is a fundamental human right and the key to sustainable development, peace and stability within and among countries, and thus an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century, which are affected by rapid globalization.

The second Dakar goal aims at all children, especially girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, having access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality by 2015.

Formal education is considered as the main route to EFA by most countries. However, while providing access to quality primary education for all children is crucial, the magnitude of EFA challenges implies that other learning systems also need to be recognized as providing important learning opportunities for out-of-school children, youth and adults who are hardly reached by the formal system.

Despite this recognition, other education delivery systems, be they non-formal or informal, are either considered as remedial or second-rate education with questionable value. This opinion is still widely held, even though already in the World Declaration on Education for All of Jomtien, the expanded vision of Basic Education called for surpassing conventional education delivery systems. This included the broadening of the means and scope of basic education and enhancing the environment for learning.

The World Declaration also pointed out that the focus of basic education should be on actual learning acquisition and outcome, rather than exclusively on enrolment, continued participation in organized programmes and certification requirements.

Following this line of thought, UNESCO is strongly supporting the idea that education and learning needs should not be seen as being limited to formal schooling, but as taking place in the entire community through all existing learning systems such

as non-formal education as well as informal education and the transmission of traditional knowledge and values. In this perspective, a learning environment should be developed which facilitates links and synergies between various learning systems.

With the aim of stimulating critical thought and discussion in this area, the Section for Literacy and Non-Formal Education of UNESCO has embarked on documenting action-research undertaken, and best practices adopted, which illustrate challenges in present educational provision as well as possible solutions which aim at building synergies between existing learning systems and ultimately at creating learning communities.

The present document, commissioned by UNESCO and jointly published by Aide et Action and UNESCO, has been prepared by Mrs. Sheela Pimpare, who undertook action-research in selected villages in Madhya Pradesh together with a team of local NGOs.

This document critically examines the meaning of education and learning in these villages and questions the capacity of formal schooling to cater to these wide and varied learning needs. It questions the role of schooling in an empowerment process.

Valuable insights into the reality of rural India is provided and the reader is lead to critically reflect upon learning needs and the various existing educational options and their value. The present document mainly focuses on the description and analysis of these specific situations and challenges in a given context and does not claim to provide a ready-made answer to the problem of education. On the contrary, it proposes a methodology which aims at finding, supporting and promoting a pluralistic understanding of education and hence the need to look for a variety of responses to the problems. This is a necessary first step towards a broader understanding of what needs to be done to achieve EFA and sustainable development in this context.

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INTRODUCTION

Aide et Action (AEA), a Paris-based non-governmental organisation was founded in 1981, with the objective of empowerment of marginalized communities in the third world. The organisation identified *basic education for children* as a necessary and fundamental tool for empowerment. It works today in India, nine African states, Haiti and Cambodia.

During the last 20 years in India, the organisation has supported the foundation and a qualitative improvement of more than 600 schools. In the mid-nineties, after more than 15 years of work together with our NGO partners which contributed to the improvement of the quality of schools and successful enrolment drives in the organisation's areas of work, Aide et Action had to recognise that despite these efforts, there were still a certain number of children who did not enrol and others who dropped out before completion of primary schooling. There was also a considerable number of schooled youth who were marginalized in their own environments. This led to fundamental questions about whether the schools that Aide et Action funded were really making a positive difference in the lives of all the children and their families, as well as having an impact on the larger system of education, for example in India. The question came up if there were other education systems to support as well and if empowerment was really taking place in the areas where we worked?

The General Assembly of the organisation in 1998 determined the need to develop a deeper understanding of the people's education needs in order to respond to them appropriately. It also reiterated that the strength of the organisation lay in promoting and projecting the experiences of grass root communities to the policy makers. The present research, which was undertaken in the Guna district, Madhya Pradesh in India, is a result of these decisions.

Initial research on existing reports and individual consultations with education administrators, experts, activists, NGO leaders, corporate representatives, parents and children led Aide et Action to classify the main problems of the Indian education system into three broad categories: inefficient administration; irrelevant curriculum, especially in the rural areas, and negligence of learning conditions and processes. We decided to take a deeper look into the latter problem i.e., the area of learning. A series of workshops was conducted with the help of Shikshantar[1], Udaipur and the Learning Development

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[1] Shikshantar, based in Udaipur, is the People's Institute for Rethinking Education and Development

Institute, Florida in order to understand and provoke debate around the recent research and concepts of 'learning' and 'learning communities'. The Madhya Pradesh State Education Authorities, educationists, education activists, NGOs, teachers and representatives of village assemblies participated in this debate and made valuable contributions during these workshops.

This phase of the study gave way to a second phase of research that we called "Liberate School". "Liberate School" is not an anti-school discourse. It considers school as one learning space among many others. It wishes to recognize, validate and promote existing knowledge and learning systems beyond the school walls and integrate school into the authentic learning environment of children, families and communities. The research started with a study of the '*education needs*' understood as '*learning needs*' of people. This phase lasted five months beginning April 2000 in the Raghogarh block of the Guna district in Madhya Pradesh.

The present document is divided into four parts. The first section analyses the reasons which led Aide et Action to undertake such research. The second section describes the research methodology used. This is followed by a third section presenting our findings, new understandings and hopes. The last section provides the reader with some brief conclusions. The appendix presents an outline of the action-research we intend to undertake in order to support and continue the process of liberating school and developing learning communities.

EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

The main objective of Aide et Action is to empower marginalized communities in Developing Countries to take control of their future. Q*uality basic education for children* was identified as the foundation for empowerment. Education is commonly defined as a process that takes place in schools and more specifically in the public education system. Our assumption therefore was that all children must be in school. All the reasons for children not being in schools were sought. Twenty years ago these were identified as family chores, poor economic conditions and lack of quality schooling facilities. The education programmes of Aide et Action and their NGO partners, like those of other international and civil society organisations, addressed these issues. As a result, enrolment in the Aide et Action supported schools often increased to 70 to 80%. However, other children did not enrol or did not attend. The reason for these lacunae gradually shifted to the quality of teachers and education in schools. So the efforts shifted towards teacher training, teacher motivation, child-centred teaching methods and so on. Lack of awareness among parents about the need for education was also highlighted as a strong reason for non-schooling, especially with regards to girls. Strong parent awareness campaigns were held in a bid to convince them of the need for education. The concept of sustainability gradually crept into our concerns and made us intensify our awareness campaigns, the objective being that people should understand this need as theirs and take entire responsibility for it. In order to be efficient, the target population had to be consulted and their participation on the issue of schooling became compulsory.

In the course of action that followed, it was found that schooling was fourth or fifth on people's list of priorities, preceded by employment, health and housing. Nevertheless, when told that our funding for Aide et Action schools would gradually cease, many groups reacted positively and manifested their desire to continue the work which was initiated. It was made clear to them that if schools were to continue, the community would have to participate and make them work. It soon became obvious that if communities took responsibility for schools, we would have to support them in the process by training them in certain management, financial and monitoring systems. This in turn would help in sustaining their interest in schools and thereby result in a sustained "need" for schools. Many such "sustainability plans" have been designed in consultation with the actors – the NGO animators and Village Education Committees (VEC) – and are currently being undertaken. This clearly indicated the interest that school holds for many families and communities. However, encouraging financial or any other kind of

participation (time or effort for example) often led those already interested in schools to invest more of their time and money in the system. It is hard to imagine that it would attract out-of-school children to join schools. So, when confronted with the fact that schooling is expensive not only for the State but also for families[2], our efforts began focussing on a reduction of cost (by introducing the concept of Community Based Teachers for example) as well as on an increase in opportunities (by multiplying vocational training options). Schooling seemed to have gradually become an end in itself. So the question of those out of school remained unanswered. How do they enable their own empowerment process? What do they learn? Where and how?

In simple terms, empowerment means transfer of power to people to actively participate in their environments and make their own choices. Ardoino distinguishes between the notions of autonomy and empowerment.[3] While the former, he says, relates to power exercised in what we would call the mainstream, the latter means having a capacity, acquired as much by working and through the complex effects of education as through one's own life experience, to take control of one's own life.

The education system was expected to provide the communities we intervened in, with tools needed to negotiate with the State and market frameworks and become part of the mainstream. Qualifications are indeed compulsory, in order to negotiate with the organised sector of the job market. It offers however a meagre chance of success, as the frameworks in question do not guarantee a reward to everyone. The PROBE study states that the education system has had a disempowering effect on those who have not been able to go through the filtration system and '*compete for the limited goodies waiting at the top of the pyramid…*'[4] The option for those left out of the race, is to return to agriculture, animal husbandry, small industry or petty commerce and schooling has little to do with these activities. It neither helps them understand the larger environment which governs these activities nor does it give them a chance to challenge and change the frameworks which may have in fact led to their marginalization. How can schooling then be considered as a means to empowerment by those groups?

Our assumptions about the negative impact of child labour, unfriendly school environments, distance of schools from home and poor quality of teaching on

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[2] The PROBE study, among others, confirms that 'Schooling is expensive in terms of opportunity and direct costs to the families'. The Probe team 1999: 32

[3] Ardoino 2000 : 200-201

[4] The Probe Team 1999: 3.

access to and quality of school have also been questioned by the PROBE research. The latter notes that '*an out-of-school boy spends* (only) *35% of a 12 hour working day at work and is free for the remaining 65% of his time. For girls the same ratio stands at 43 : 57.*' [5] This means children are not engaged in full-time labour. The same study also concludes that it is not poor teaching standards, hostile school environment or distance from schooling but rather *'the presence of the child in other activities'* that appears as a pre-dominant reason for non-schooling. They argue however that poor teaching standards play a role in deciding on alternative choices they have to make. Quality of teaching is certainly an issue but the PROBE conclusions also oblige us to acknowledge that schooling is one activity (one media form) among many others (play, leisure, domestic chores and so on) and that the children and their families are exercising a choice in not attending school.

However, we often tend to consider these 'other activities' as 'child labour' and the child's presence in them is widely contested under the child rights banner. This issue is very sensitive and must be discussed with great caution. Education is a human right to which all children should have access. At the same time, education must be functional and respond to the needs of the learner in his community. As regards child labour, a differentiation should be made between exploitation of children in factories or other forced labour and children helping in the household or in the field, where a learning process takes place while contributing to family chores. At the same time, if the latter takes up the entire day of the child and leaves no time for other types of learning, this should be questioned.

There are various reasons why children work, one of which is poverty. It is also claimed that in most cases, families do not understand the importance of education and hence prefer to engage their children in other activities considered more useful. The Child Rights lobby supports children's right to schooling and therefore considers their presence at work as unacceptable. They claim that making school mandatory will end child labour. Education (meaning schooling) was finally given the status of a fundamental right in India in December 2001. There is no debate about education being a right, but what was initially considered a 'right' got gradually converted into an 'obligation' for millions of children and families who do not attach much importance to the activity of schooling.

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[5] The Probe Team 1999: 29.

While the above school of thought considers schooling essential but admits that schools need to be reformed,[6] another believes that schools have done more harm than good to children and therefore need to be abolished.[7] We wish to re-centre this debate on the question of empowerment. For example, most such working children are exploited by the market economy. Asking a child to give up his 'working activity' in favour of schooling – which is what most awareness campaigns are all about – would imply that

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Case study of children in the bidi industry in the Vellore district, Tamil Nadu

A local NGO in partnership with Aide et Action, worked in a few villages of the Vellore district, Tamil Nadu, among children who were subject to bonded labour in the bidi industry. Initially the intervention consisted of convincing parents on the one hand and employers of children on the other, to let children go to a supplementary school conducted in the evenings after working hours. This gave the children a small break from their work, and this interaction with the children enabled us to understand the problems which they and their families faced. It did not however solve any of those problems.

It was then decided to aim at putting an end to bonded labour among children. As part of this phase, it was decided that children should attend regular government schools in the day with special courses for mainstreaming. This resulted in many children attending formal school but working in the same vulnerable conditions in the morning and evening. At the same time, a revolving fund was introduced within the communities in order to free their children from bondage. While some families accepted the interest-free loan, others did not, out of fear of not getting any other employment. Bondage ensured the families and children a job. The project succeeded in eliminating bonded labour for children in some villages but not in all. The problem of bonded labour in general however continues to prevail in this area and is a way of life for many families. The family debts which lead to bonded labour continue to be transferred from one generation to another.

The learning content in school had nothing to do with the exploitative environment which governed their daily life, and the main learning process was memorisation. While in school, children were not given a chance to understand and critically analyse their environment nor did they develop the communication, negotiation or dialogue skills required to change it. Most children who went to school hoped at the end of it to get out of their village and find a better job elsewhere.

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[6] The common discourse of most international and national organisations in Education.

[7] Ivan Illich and John Holt among others.

that is the only way for him and his family to overcome their state of exploitation. However in order to understand the exploitative factors of his environment and overcome them, an individual must reflect, question, critically analyse, communicate and negotiate. Do schools really encourage these capacities?

The PROBE study observes that schools do not even let children critically analyse or question false platitudes about their own lives routinely doled out as absolute truths.[8] Conflicts and complexities of life, like the exploitative authority of a contractor, or the intricacies of taking loans from moneylenders, are strictly avoided whereas most children actually live such lives and are deeply conscious of its realities. Textbooks for example present the dominant view by which the construction of dams is a necessity for the economic growth of the country. Millions of children whose families and lives are disrupted by such plans would find it difficult to share this point of view and yet the plans can never be questioned. Visser, in a definition of learning, notes that '*Human learning is the disposition of human beings, and of the social entities to which they pertain, to engage in continuous dialogue with the human, social, biological and physical environment,*

so as to generate intelligent behaviour and to interact constructively with change.[9] It seems that schools, which were intended to foster these learning processes and hence empowerment, very often deny individuals the right to believe in and express what they are learning in their families, communities and villages. On the contrary, a child is transformed into a passive listener in order to join the mainstream.

According to Ardoino's definition, schooling leads to 'autonomy' because it attempts to give an individual the power to join the mainstream. Concretely, this means that the child gets employment. And by the same definition, empowerment would develop subsequently as a result of an interaction between work experience, life experience and the impact of schooling. Can empowerment processes be encouraged at the same time as schooling?

The importance of literacy has been underlined in Jomtien in 1990 and reiterated in Dakar during the World Education Forum in 2000. Moreover, the UN Literacy Decade, which will start in 2003, clearly recognizes the importance of promoting Literacy for All in the framework

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[8] The Probe Team 1999: 72

[9] Visser 2001: 146.

of EFA. Literacy is no doubt a basic learning tool, and one of the foundations for further learning and development.

However, for many education programmes the transmission of basic literacy skills has become an end in itself, which is not necessarily linked to development or empowerment. Reading and writing must be considered as one of the basic learning tools towards empowerment, but at the same time it is important also to find out which are the other tools being used by communities to learn, i.e. to understand and analyse their environment and to further develop their knowledge, skills and the ability to use them.[10] The question therefore is what the place and role of each of these learning tools is in the global framework of lifelong learning and empowerment. The 'pro-schooling' discourse goes on to claim that '*the non-economic benefits of education* (meaning schooling) *lie in the rise of self-esteem and social status'.*[11] In many of the Aide et Action interventions, the *dalit*[12] communities, for example, claim to be

more empowered in their relations with the 'forward castes', thanks to the NGO-led interventions in development and schooling. Their children have accessed jobs that were previously reserved for the other castes. Another common claim is that children who have been to school are smarter and have more confidence in talking to others. One may be tempted to say that these communities have indeed climbed the social ladder but it would be rather simplistic. Although PROBE essentially defends this point of view, it also adds that '*The way school knowledge is structured and articulated, it never allows the rural child to have an edge over the 'privileged' urban ones.*'[13] '*For instance, there is always a topic on types of houses, in which the concrete bungalow, the semi-pucca house and the jhuggi are mechanically presented as given types…. A good house is always one with a separate kitchen; toilets, windows etc. and millions of children who live in conditions that do not conform to these norms are immediately alienated. In the case of tribal children this alienation is severe, since their very existence and identity is portrayed ambiguously and problematically… Textbooks routinely carry a chapter on 'Our State', which mentions that 'tribal and backward persons' inhabit our state in large numbers…. One can only*

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[10] Rahnema notes: '*Literacy campaigns often turned out to be campaigns against the non-literate, rather than helping the oral populations to educate themselves and learn as they had always done,* 1997: 158.

[11] The Probe Team 1999: 20.

[12] Term used to describe people belonging to the lower castes in the Indian caste system.

[13] The Probe Team 1999: 72.

imagine what this does to the self-image of tribal and so-called backward children and what messages it gives to the others'.[14] Another study conducted by the Society for the Integrated Development of the Himalayas (SIDH)[15] distinguishes between relative and subjective confidence. '*Relative confidence derives its strength on the basis of the other not possessing knowledge skill or information while real confidence is not dependent on anything external but derives its strength from within – from one's intrinsic worth*'. Indeed children who grow up to imagine that their lifestyle and culture are inferior to those of the urban middle class, cannot but be considered as having a low self-esteem.

Faced with these concerns, many attempts have been made at reforming schools. However, based on the severe criticisms that schools face, we decided in our second phase of research to simply observe the empowerment processes adopted by people and children in particular and to assess the importance of schooling in the process. We began Action-Research (AR) in the Guna district in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India. This was the beginning of "Liberate School".

Lastly, it is important to state that "Liberate School" is not anti-school discourse. It understands school as one important learning space among other equally important learning spaces. As mentioned earlier, it wishes to recognize, validate and promote knowledge and learning beyond school walls and integrate school into the authentic learning environment of children, families and communities.

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[14] The Probe Team 1999: 76.

[15] The Society for Integrated Development of the Himalayas 1999: 28.

"LIBERATE SCHOOL":

Action-research

This Action-Research started in April 2000 in a zone composed of fourteen villages situated in Guna, a district in Madhya Pradesh in India. This first phase lasted five months and was conducted in partnership with DEBATE, a Bhopal based local NGO for the field research and with Shikshantar, based in Udaipur for documenting the process as it unfolded in the field. This field methodology being totally new for the research team, it seemed important to us to have its progress recorded by an external team.

To begin with, the team composed of Aide et Action – Debate – Shikshantar came together in a workshop held in Bhopal in March 2000, to reflect on the notion of 'education' and what that meant to each one of us. The discussions led the participants to analyse their own meaningful learning experiences and the role that school played in them. The workshop raised many fundamental questions to which the group had no answers. Each one had to look for these while interacting in the field.

However during the workshop, the experiences of the different members of the group were noted down and are summarised below:[16]

Individuals look for different ways to learn what they desire and need to learn for their survival. They live and learn in a vast learning environment composed of families, community groups, livelihoods, market place, radio, television, nature, friends, and events like elections, religious and cultural festivals.

- School remains an isolated entity in this vast environment and yet 'education' is limited to a narrow and confined vision of schooling focused on transmitting a narrow framework of knowledge,

- Basic education in most education programmes means literacy and numeracy,

- Large-scale absenteeism and a high dropout rate among children may be due to poverty but also due to a lack of interest in such education and an incapacity to adapt to the system,

- In relation to their life styles and learning priorities, families have often made a conscious decision of 'de-schooling'.

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[16] It should be noted that these are the experiences of the members of this group who have spent between ten and fifteen years interacting with village communities.

Determined to understand education in its larger and true sense as reiterated in Jomtien,[17] the team sought to undertake field research on the following:

- The perceptions and expectations of the local actors of 'education' and 'schooling'.

- The other learning needs, systems and spaces in these communities

- The linkages between school and the other segments of the learning environment.

The research team was already experienced in the use of participatory research approaches, but had little theoretical or practical experience in the action-research or consultation process we desired to engage in with the communities. This put the research team in a learning mode. It will become obvious in the section

on methodology that it was important for the team to learn to dialogue through practice in the field and not on the basis of 'theories' laid down by experts. The enquiry methods used in the field were later called Participatory Conceptualisation and are described in the following section.

This research was conducted in the Raghogarh block of the Guna district. It is the largest block of the district representing 21% of its villages and 12% of its population.[18] 85% of its people live in rural areas, and 31% of them belong to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups. Five out of 95 *gram panchayats* (village counsel) in the block were selected for this study: Pagara, Awan, Sagar, Khairaee, and Akhirkhedi.

The block has 302 primary schools, including 131 formal and 129 recently introduced EGS (Education Guarantee Scheme) schools. A total of 32,235 children, 60% of whom are boys, are enrolled in different primary level educational centres. As part of the *Lok Sampark Abhiyan* campaign in 1996, a total of 244 villages in Raghogarh district were surveyed. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in this survey was 69 per cent – 71% for boys and 45% for girls. 40% of the

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[17] The vision of Jomtien says: "Basic learning needs …comprise both essential learning tools…and the basic learning content… required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning." (World Declaration on Education for All 1990: 3). Although one wonders whether school alone can handle such a large mission, it has to be reiterated that the main interventions undertaken by governments and NGOs have been in the field of formal schooling – even Dakar admitted as much – and schools, faced with the enormous task they have, invariably concentrate on the essentials especially at the primary level i.e. reading, writing and numeracy.

[18] 1991 Census: 157935 inhabitants

5-14 age group was out of school. At the time of the survey, 29% boys and 55% girls were not attending school. There were 685 teachers for 198 primary level institutions in the block, 24% of whom were women. The teacher/pupil ratio was 1:47. One-fifth of the rural population and half of the urban population were literate.

The total budget for primary schooling in the block was 850.000 USD (Rs 3.82 crores) in 1999-2000, excluding scholarships and mid-day meals. Around 96% of this budget was spent on salaries.

Our 14 villages were situated in the five *panchayats* mentioned above and concerned a total population of 4479 people belonging to 691 households. The team spent 5 months on this phase of research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Having practised diverse participatory approaches in development programmes in general and in education programmes in particular, the team members undertook a self-analysis of the limits of these approaches before embarking on a new process. The present section firstly describes the self-critique of the commonly used participatory methods and secondly explains Participatory Conceptualisation as an AR process.

Participatory Methods: a critique

In the field of education today, the term 'community participation' has become a widely accepted intervention strategy – a practical and moral pre-requisite for development activities – among international donors, NGOs and even government bodies. It is directly associated with the concept of empowerment. This mainstream discourse uses community participation as a means for getting local people to identify, design, plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate a project designed by an outsider. In every sector, local contributions in formulating the objectives and budgets and in supervising the implementation and fund utilisation have become an important indicator in the life of a project.

Almost all members of the team had experience in this dominant approach to 'community participation'. Aide et Action, in its sustainability strategies, asked the 'beneficiary' population – via the NGO partners – to inform them about their problems, their agreements and their willingness to participate in the education projects that had been proposed and implemented for a few years. Aide et Action hoped that this initiative would motivate local communities, mobilise them, make them take ownership of the project, contribute to improving its efficiency and build institutional partnerships with external deciders in a democratic manner. The main questions raised were: *Do you wish the school to continue? What are your problems with regards to school? What do you think you can do to ensure that all children are enrolled into school and complete primary schooling? How can the quality of school be improved? How can the quality be maintained? How can we mobilise the funds needed for running the school? What are your responsibilities with regards to school and how do you propose to go about it: follow-up of activities, teachers, finances etc.* These questions clearly illustrate that our concerns on education were limited to schooling, despite the larger meaning that we may want to attribute to it.

The Government of Madhya Pradesh now considers community participation as an important element in the project planning cycle. This State therefore provides a good opportunity to understand the limits of standardised participatory tools. However, practitioners do not necessarily believe in PRA and interpret it just as an exercise in mapping for baseline data procurement. They usually implement participatory exercises with a checklist mindset ('I have to finish time line, resource mapping…'), with the emphasis on collecting information as fast as possible to get onto the next project.

Trainers and training tend to stick to the mother manual and ready-made methodologies and indicators. Rarely is there any effort to encourage future practitioners to analyse the obstacles and limits of the existing tools or generate their own tools. Most practitioners tend to work as generalists, applying the same participatory tools across all development sectors. Lastly, most facilitators tend to impose their own logic and morality on people, without spending enough time to understand why the people believe or do certain things.

Participatory tools in Madhya Pradesh also tend to be mechanically implemented. In most participatory exercises, the role of the villagers is reduced to either informers or consumers. Contrary to the avowed spirit of PRA, the practitioners/project teams dictate what symbols must be used in the mapping process. Oftentimes, they even do drawings for the villagers. Apart from the *roti* diagrams (which are basically pie charts in disguise), practitioners have made little effort to situate the tools in relation to local people's different perspectives, knowledge, values, priorities or interests. Information that does not fit within the pre-determined problem narrative is systematically discarded.[19] Furthermore, there is little space or time for villagers to engage in critical analysis, deep reflection or local vision-building. Because practitioners rarely return to villages to cross-check their facts or share their synthesis, there are few opportunities for sustained dialogue around real concerns.

While participatory processes claim to accurately capture the voices of the marginalized, the reality is quite different. The people who actively participate in so-called participatory exercises are usually leaders, mainly men, belonging to upper caste, who speak Hindi or English. Amod

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[19] According to Manish Jain and Selena George from Shikshantar, community participation tools offer little room for the deep wisdom and constructive imaginations of diverse villagers to emerge. For more details see Jain and George 2001.

Khanna adds, "Villagers often then use their status of informer for a) settling a score with government or other project beneficiaries; b) enhancing their position to receive benefits; or c) making the researchers happy so that they will leave them alone."

Participants from Shikshantar presented diverse and dissenting perspectives which have emerged over the years and which challenge this mainstream narrative of community participation and the hegemonic institutions. These perspectives respect local peoples' abilities to conceptualise their lives and seek to regenerate pluralist spaces, media and opportunities for doing so. They call for individuals and groups to define what a meaningful and dignified life is to them (within a larger spirit of inter-dependence); to regenerate their own notions of freedom, equality, justice, unity and progress; and to organize their own action processes and spaces for collective learning. For this to happen in a genuine way, they clarify that people's hands should not be tied by predetermined 'practical options' and that peoples' wills not be coerced by institutional agendas, project cycles or the imposition of artificial needs. They demand that organizations move away from mechanistic and homogenizing modes of organization/planning towards more organic and contextualized approaches.

According to Shikshantar, the dissenting perspectives insist that efforts must be made to transcend the artificial compartmentalisation of life into sectors such as education, health, agriculture, natural resource management, and culture, or into theory versus practice, [20] or even into isolating relational categories like 'childhood' and 'adulthood'.[21] They understand that meaningful learning takes place in all aspects of our lives and that no single medium, such as the school, television or computer can cater to the diverse learning needs, styles or intelligences of human beings.[22]

Shikshantar adds that, ironically, both the mainstream and the dissenting perspectives agree that mass schooling has not delivered on many of its promises. Many 'educated' communities around the world are in a crisis situation, faced with increasing exploitation and unemployment, corruption, migration and brain drain, loss of local languages, growing alienation and frustrations of youth (coupled with acts of violence), breakdown of social (particularly intergenerational) relationships. They both acknowledge also that education systems

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[20] For a more detailed discussion, see UNESCO 1998.

[21] For a more detailed discussion, see Holt 1995.

[22] For a more detailed discussion, see Gardner 1999 and Caine et al. 1994.

are not prepared to deal with new ethical challenges that are emerging around the world e.g. hi-tech manipulation of information, artificial intelligence, global warming, genetic engineering and cloning. Both also recognise the deep tension and fight over who controls the education agenda today – the nation-builders, multinational corporations, scientists and technocrats, the religious leaders, families, or the individual. Finally, they agree that it is very difficult to get the bloated institution of schooling, with all of its politics and bureaucracy, to move in more pedagogically creative and community-responsive directions.

The Bhopal workshop not only gave an opportunity to undertake this reflection on the current experiences on community participation but also tried to understand some of the assumptions on which these methods are based. In the paper that documents this research entitled "Regenerating Learning through Participatory Conceptualisation" (2001), Jain and George highlight these assumptions. There are four types of assumptions:

1. Assumptions about Development:

Esteva (1992) explains how the use of terms 'developed' and 'underdeveloped', resulted in a new hegemonic framework,

with its own set of reference points. Community participation efforts still situate themselves in this framework, which has many implications. Gross National Product (GNP) became the key indicator to sort and rank societies. Those peoples with a low GNP (i.e. roughly 80% of the world) became the 'backward' and 'underdeveloped' and had to replicate the same practices, systems and stages of growth that had been adopted by the developed countries – industrialization, nationalism, urbanization, militarization and technologization. Two essential pre-requisites were necessary for development to be successful. First, everything in the community – natural resources, labour, relationships, knowledge – had to be converted into a commodity that could extracted and exploited (by the state or market). Second, local people had to see themselves as 'undeveloped' and feel the need to attain this vision of development. Development projects were thus oriented towards looking at 'underdeveloped' societies from the *framework of deficit*. The focus is on what 'problems' people have in submitting to or following development norms, not on asking them what their strengths are or what direction they would like to move in.

2. Assumptions about education:

Despite their stated appreciation for local contexts, mainstream community participation efforts in education

paradoxically situate themselves within restricted meanings of education: as either formal or non-formal schooling. By non-formal schooling we mean the various morning or evening schools organised by NGOs for primary or secondary education (and not vocational training centres, special schools for the handicapped, or adult education centres which cater to specific learning needs). These systems strictly follow the government school curriculum because they either aim to get children to join the formal schools or provide extra coaching for those already enrolled in the mainstream schools. Their flexibility lies in the school timings and the extra-curricular activities. School came to be considered as the only place of significant and genuine learning and knowledge. Within this framework of schooling, it was assumed that all children and communities were *'blank slates'* and *'empty vessels'* (Freire 1972). They were believed to have universal minimum basic learning needs and uniform learning styles At the same time, indigenous spaces of learning – like grazing cattle, doing household chores, farming, artisan craftwork, social festivals – were all redefined as 'problematic' in that they prevented children from going to school. In most community participation processes, then, there is no space for fundamentally questioning and re-framing meanings of education; it is equated to the school. Other local meanings and spaces of learning and knowledge systems are not explored at all.

3. Assumptions about the People:

"*So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything – that they are sick, lazy and unproductive – that in the end they themselves become convinced of their own unfitness… Almost never do they realize that they, too, 'know things' they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men.*" (Freire 1972: 39). Most community participation approaches consider local people to be in the same miserable condition, steeped in stagnant and paralysing traditions, community participation advocates make little attempt to understand the hopes, dreams, feelings, logic systems, experiences, opinions, values, creativities, and relationships of local people. Further, the notion of 'community' often assumes a homogeneous group of people – in fact, communities manifest diversity of opinion, unequal power relations and divergent interests. It is further assumed that local people cannot take care of themselves in the modern world and they require outside intervention to be empowered.[23] They must

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[23] As Illich (1970: 3) states: "The poor have always been socially powerless. The increasing reliance on institutional care adds a new dimension to their helplessness:

be constantly told how to organize themselves, how to resist external oppression, and how to voice their concerns. Thus, the aim of many community participation projects is to establish associations or committees that clearly mirror bureaucratic structures (Cleaver 2001). It is never considered that the villagers may choose not to support or partake in a development project. Many researcher-activists have noted that people confront their oppression with resistance all the time. Characteristically, these acts of resistance are subtle, individual efforts, committed without attracting too much attention. Often, community participation approaches have either blocked or co-opted the recognition of spaces of resistance, critical self-reflection and regeneration that naturally exist in every village.

4. Assumptions about our roles as facilitators:

Participatory facilitators and researchers generally view themselves as experts in development and in the execution of community participation approaches. They are 'unbiased' and 'neutral' recorders of participatory processes; unlike local people, they can stand apart from life and

psychological impotence...such care only makes them dependent…renders them incapable of organising their own lives around their own experiences and resources within their own communities."

observe it objectively (Kane 1995). However, this is highly problematic for several reasons. First, the facilitators rarely discuss the limitations of their tools or of themselves in understanding and conveying diverse realities and as the translators and interpreters of local knowledge. There is little recognition that local knowledge is highly differentiated. Second, to local people, facilitators represent the power and resources of the state and its international patrons. Villagers learn to frame their answers based on their perceptions of what the agency is able to deliver. As Mosse (2001) explains, "*Arguably, through participatory learning, it is farmers who acquire new 'planning knowledge' and learn how to manipulate processes, rather than professionals who acquire local perspectives.*" Third, when compiling the information obtained, most facilitators discuss 'villages' and 'villagers' in the abstract and generalize their findings for large-scale projects.[24] Roles and

[24] Faundez (1989: 31) delves into this problem, "When I am asked if I know Africa or Latin America well, I reply 'no'. And with each journey I know less! This is a totally different attitude from that of Europeans. They go and stay for two or three years and then become specialists in Latin America or Africa. With every journey I make, I become less of a specialist, a non-specialist, in Africa and Latin America, precisely I discover these essential differences. Whereas Europeans try to discover what there is in *common,* and that becomes the essential for them, for me the essential is in the 'differences', and, since each time I discover more differences, each time I become more aware of how little I know. That is the way of modesty, and it is the essential way."

research findings are also distorted by facilitators' own conditioning (via development and schooling) and the institutional pressure of their funding agencies. This happens through selective listening: only paying attention to the points that they want to hear from the local people, and using a very narrow set of variables and questions. For example, those working in education only talk about schools, literacy rates, or enrolments. Kane (1995) states, *"They assume that it is always other people who need consciousness raising, empowering and liberation."* This "other" mentality encourages facilitators to avoid critical self-reflection on themselves, their institutions, and their roles**.** Most community participation approaches in education involve very little unlearning, relearning or critical self-reflection on the part of the facilitator. Nor does the subject of the surveillance have the "*reciprocal power to 'observe' and comment on the role and actions of the observer*" (Kothari 2001). According to Rahnema (1992), the problem basically starts with the facilitators' mistaken belief that they know the answers and the oppressed majorities do not.

This self-critique on the participatory methods helped to begin the AR process. This was practised on an experimental basis during this phase and was later called 'Participatory Conceptualisation'. As

has been mentioned above, Shikshantar was invited to document the process on the field. During this phase which lasted five months, two members of Shikshantar accompanied the DEBATE/ Aide et Action research team for a period of one month divided into four parts. The following section describes the field methodology as it was conceived and implemented on the field.

Method implemented: Participatory Conceptualisation

In his comprehensive study on Action-Research (AR), Barbier points out that new Action-Research was defined by Carr and Kemmis in 1983 as research conducted by practitioners on their own practice. It is a critique and is empowering. *Action-Research is empowering in the sense that a group of practitioners organise themselves to take responsibility for their own emancipation from irrational and bureaucratic habits of coercion.*[25] Such emancipating AR implies according to Barbier, three things:

- the researcher-practitioners perceive the 'education process' as an object of research;

- they perceive the social nature and the consequences of the reform engaged in;

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[25] Barbier 1996 : 39.

- they understand the research itself as a social, political and therefore ideological activity.

The team's self-reflection left them with a double objective. First, they had to put into practice the results of their own research begun at the workshop i.e. to adopt a new frame of mind for work in the field. Second, they had to stimulate the same frame of mind in the field actors by creating the necessary conditions for empowering and emancipating AR to take place.[26] Spurred by the discussions that took place during the workshop, the research team had a strong desire to provoke change in the field. They were however conscious that the nature of the change cannot be imposed by an external agent, but rather should result from research activity that the actors are invited to undertake on themselves.

The team sought to elucidate the expectations and perceptions of the local actors on 'education' and 'schooling', on the other learning needs, on modes and spaces of the communities and on the link between school and these other constituents of the learning environment.

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[26] In this sense, our research could be categorised as 'action-research' according to the typology of the old AR presented by Barbier 1996: 26-28.

However, they tried at the same time to create a collective awareness on the need to react to the education dilemmas. There were hardly any rules established on how to engage in this process or on how to conduct the dialogue with the actors. However, with regard to the assumptions highlighted in the previous section, the dialogue with the actors had to:

- take place in an appreciative framework

- understand the term 'education' globally and seek to discover the local learning systems

- acknowledge and admit the diversity of opinion within a community and various forms of resistance to the dominant view.

It was also essential that the research facilitators consider themselves as co-learners in their interaction with the communities — learning together about new ways of understanding issues like education or development and imagining new ways of understanding and leading life. Moreover, the team did not know much about the field realities of the research area.

As part of the agenda of "Liberate School", the focus of the AR was to support self-organizing dialogues through which

assumptions, differences, values, possibilities and myths can be revealed and shared visions and actions can be discovered.

The following two sections describe the process and the content of these self-organised dialogues as they took place until now, observed and documented by Shikshantar.[27]

Process : Self-Organising Dialogues

> *"Conversation is not just about conveying information or sharing emotions, not just a way of putting ideas into people's heads… Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought."* -Theodore Zeldin (1998: 14)

Beginning a dialogue

Initially some DEBATE/AEA team members had used various participatory tools in some villages, as a means of building rapport and procuring some baseline information about the village

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[27] See Jain and George: 2001.

demographics[28] — these closely resembled commonly used participatory research methods. But it was soon realized that the early use of participatory tools created a 'project mentality' among the villagers. People tended to associate these tools with the large surveys (such as the Census) carried out by the government. The team realized that using them might contribute to a false perception that the information being collected would be used later to inform the distribution of some

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[28] Various PRA tools were used during the course of the research including:

1) Timeline: for recording the historical data of the village and for specific activities and resources.

2) Social Mapping: for recording the settlement pattern of the village and for generating a list of the households in the village.

3) Seasonality Calendar: for identifying various activities in the village during the year and also for establishing the cycle of agricultural operations as well as of other occupations being carried out in the village.

4) Resource Maps: for understanding various natural resources and the services and facilities in the village.

5) Daily Activity Charts: for understanding different groups' daily activity schedule in detail and the time taken in various activities. This information was used for generating further data on how each of these activities have undergone a change over a period of time.

6) Dependency Maps: for identifying what used to exist in the village and how has it changed over time in terms of livelihood activities, daily life activities, managing social events, and practical knowledge.

7) Health Calendars: for identifying child-birth, diseases and illness and assessing the extent of information that exists in the community.

8) Occupation Matrix: for identifying the various occupations practiced by the families.

material benefit, or to punish some official for not completing their work properly. If such a perception was created, there would be a great risk that the responses would be distorted by the villagers and the dialogue would stagnate. For example, in one village it was found that the number of *chulas* (earthen ovens) in each house had been largely exaggerated during the Census. The local people's understanding was that with more *chulas* (which each represented one household), they would receive more benefits.

Once in the project-mode mentality, the villagers' sole concern would be how much money was entering the village and who would receive it. This would create an atmosphere of mistrust, apprehension and cut-throat competition among the villagers, which would undermine the dialogue. Therefore, instead of continuing the use of participatory tools, the interactions evolved into a more open-ended exploratory process including an extensive introduction by the DEBATE/AEA team to the village.

In the introduction, the DEBATE/AEA team clearly stated that they were not bringing any project to the village. They simply came to talk (*bath chith karne ke liye*) with the people, to learn from them, to understand their lives. They would be willing to share any knowledge that they

had with the villagers. They also invited people to visit their office whenever they came to Rajgarh or Bhopal.

As part of their introduction, the DEBATE/AEA team asked permission to come back to the village in the following days to meet with different people in the village. They promised to share the results of their discussions with villagers. The first group interaction tended to leave the villagers a little confused but curious to find out more. The DEBATE/AEA team viewed this curious confusion as healthy since it created space for different kinds of engagement processes. They would participate directly in specific activities, such as ploughing the fields with the men-folk, playing cricket with youth, bathing in a river with children, making *batis* with women, plastering a house with women. The team also participated in the various religious and social activities being celebrated by the villagers. Nowhere in the introduction was it mentioned that this visit was connected to an education project (*shiksha* in Hindi). This was critical, for villagers equate the word *shiksha* directly with schools (not surprising, since it has been translated as such by numerous government/media/ NGO agents). In initial cases, when the word *shiksha* was mentioned, the villagers either told the team to go to the school and meet with the teacher or they started talking about the

school. The bulk of them would just walk away out of disinterest.

The interactions that took place could broadly be divided into two categories: one-to-one meetings with individuals and small groups of both children and adults (typically 4-6 people) during the day, followed by larger collective village meetings at night. The information collected during one-to-one and small group meetings was shared back with the large group in the evening meetings to deepen the dialogue and find out about related experiences. The one-to-one and small group meetings during the day were also important for more in-depth explorations of what was said in the large group meetings. The DEBATE/AEA team found this dialectic interaction between daytime and evening sessions to be critical because, in accordance with principles of self-organization, it enabled the living system (the village) to connect with more of itself. Going through several iterations of this process was important, as it allowed the villagers to clarify and challenge their previous opinions and also to change them if they felt so inclined.

Throughout this process, dialogue was seen as the unfolding of shared meaning and the creation of a common pool of opinions and experiences – to stimulate

both reflection and action. This process began by openly exploring any specific areas of concern that different villagers had. Various issues related to learning and knowledge were raised, ranging from health to agriculture, animal husbandry to social festivals, television to caste relations. The subject of discussion could change at any time depending on the interests of the specific villagers involved. In line with the objective of 'Liberate School', the emphasis was on understanding the learning spaces and opportunities which exist or existed in the villages outside school, on the changes that occurred in the village and on the opinions of the villagers. If a specific concern provided matter for a collective discussion, the team refused to impose it on all the village groups.[29] There was no pressure to come to any conclusions or to formulate any solutions on any of the concerns. Rather, the team sought to do the opposite – keep the space open for the dialogue to unfold naturally.[30]

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[29] Although the reflection process is started by the researchers according to their own modalities, the research is undertaken by the actors themselves on their own situation. Barbier 1996: 27.

[30] Bohm and Nichol 1996: 17: "In the dialogue group we are not going to decide what to do about anything. This is crucial. Otherwise, we are not free. We must have an empty space where we not obliged to do anything, nor to come to any conclusions, nor to say anything or not say

In meeting with the villagers, the DEBATE/AEA team wanted to ensure that everyone was engaged. They were constantly aware of the power of certain members of the community to dominate and co-opt the dialogue. Faced with these more vocal power-grabbers (village representatives, the highly schooled, the men, leaders from the dominant caste group), other people would just sit quietly and let them speak. But in the corners, these quiet sections of people (like the women) were also busy having conversations amongst themselves, in which they were thinking about and analysing what was being said. It was necessary for these conversations also to become part of the process to ensure that all perspectives were made visible. The DEBATE/AEA team made it a point to spread themselves around the group, to locate themselves in such a way as to be able to cover as many clusters of people as possible. During the discussions that followed, the team identified voices and opinions from people in sitting on the margins – active, concerned voices that would otherwise not have been seen or heard.

For example, when the team inquired about the drought situation and the lack of

water in one village, the *patwari*[31] responded that there was no way the village could get water. Some villagers in a small group outside the discussion circle started snickering at him. One of the team members, sitting close to them, asked why they were making faces. They said that the *patwari* was lying, that all they had to do was to deepen the canal that ran through the village. When asked why they did not do it themselves, they said that they were waiting for the government to come with a project. These farmers were then urged to voice what they had just said in the meeting. When at first they did not speak, one of the DEBATE/AEA team members spoke out the opinion to gauge the responses of others. As a result, the discussion took a new turn, and the silent villagers became more involved in the dialogue. Although it was desirable for everyone to speak in the large group meetings, it was not necessary for all to speak up in the same meeting. Rather, the availability of a number of dialogue spaces provided multiple opportunities for everyone to voice their opinion. This is why the meetings in the daytime were so important to the process.

Initial identification of individuals and small groups for daytime discussions related to

anything."

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[31] The local administrative representative.

the various political, economic, social, and spiritual activities that could be readily observed in the village. All of these activities were important, as all of them represented potential learning activities. As the dialogue progressed, the villagers themselves started suggesting specific individuals to be contacted regarding their special knowledge about a particular issue e.g. a person who knew about the history of the village, someone who could recall changes taking place in the village, someone who knew about animal diseases.

The language used to communicate with the villagers was primarily Hindi, which both the villagers and the DEBATE/AEA team were familiar with. Not having to depend on translators made the conversations easily comprehensible and substantially reduced the scope for misunderstanding each other. Further, all communication was in the active voice, using the first person. This meant that, as far as possible, questions and statements were framed with reference to immediate and specific instances with concrete examples and anecdotes. The DEBATE/AEA team members themselves referenced their own experiences from Bhopal, neighbouring villages or from their own villages. The manner by which the DEBATE/AEA team approached issues and encouraged various voices to speak

out established the principle of listening and being open-minded, instead of judgmental. Furthermore, there was no imposed consensus and no avoidance of conflict — the team encouraged villagers to sort out disputes among themselves.

The space for discussion was not restricted to the school or community centre. Instead, in seeking to re-validate existing indigenous learning spaces and to facilitate communication among generations, the dialogues occurred in spaces like agricultural fields, grazing pastures, people's kitchens, artisans' workshops, by the well/hand pump, or on the roads. People of different ages and backgrounds – children, elderly, youth, women – were all part of these dialogues. Specific efforts were made to visit the different caste neighbourhoods and to invite leaders of these areas personally to the large-group village meetings.

Difficulties

The difficulties were discovered as the process progressed: How to encounter a village without a project in hand to propose? How to interest the villagers in a dialogue which calls for time and energy without any tangible and obvious benefits? How to interpret their responses? How to remain constantly in an appreciative framework? How to face the villagers'

questions on their own i.e. the team's choices in life? These questions do not have ready-made answers. It is during the interaction that the facilitators learn to overcome their egos and desires and understand the true nature of action-research (see below).

Among the DEBATE/AEA team, there were also daily (late night and/or early morning) consolidation meetings where information and experiences were shared, doubts and questions raised, and new focus areas for follow-on exploration outlined. Team members knew that this was an experimental process and that there would be mistakes. What was important was not to hide them but rather to share them openly and learn together from them. It was also understood that this was a highly interpretative process. There was a great deal of attention given to trying to understand the nuances of what people were saying, reading between the lines and clarifying meanings, making sense of the complexities and intricacies of the village workings and relationships.

The team spent a lot of attention on trying to get rid of their 'expert' baggage and their 'school-coloured glasses' and on trying to understand their roles as co-learners. Much of this required opening up their own personal experiences to scrutiny and

exploring how different opinions expressed affected each of them. For example, many of the questions being raised about schooling challenged their own school experiences and privilege, as well as what was happening with their own children.

The second major difficulty was the conditioned responses from the people. From the very beginning of the process and well into it, the DEBATE/AEA team came across quite a few conditioned responses. On one level, these seemed to be an outcome of the campaigns of many NGOs and the state. The Total Literacy Campaign had provided villagers with the standard answers to why children should become literate: *so that they are able to travel to cities (by reading signs); write letters; sign contracts; and get the benefit of government schemes*. On another level, some local people were very attuned to mainstream development projects and were quite adept at delivering the response that would get them maximum benefit either in terms of money or governmental support. They were always ready with their wish-list of problems to be solved. On several occasions, certain villagers said, "Tell us what your project is and we will tell you what you want to know." Getting past these conditioned responses and provoking people to dig deeper was a real challenge. Constant provocative counter-questioning – appealing to real life

experiences and common sense – was used to try to peel away some of the layers of conditioning.

The third difficulty lay in the fact that the dialogical process also generated a considerable level of frustration among certain villagers, usually the more privileged ones. This was primarily because the DEBATE/AEA team did not meet their expectations of 'bringing a project or employment possibilities to the village'. Many villagers could not immediately understand the purpose of the questions being raised by DEBATE/AEA team.

However, a handful of the villagers in each location were eager to start working on solutions to the changes taking place in their lives. Some wanted to set up a *samiti* (committee) that would co-ordinate the process. This again was a conditioned response, as *samitis* have become an accepted norm in all development projects in India. However, previous experience indicates that they usually lead to the concentration of power and resources in the hands of a few (usually already powerful) villagers. Such an arrangement severely short-cuts the dialogical process. On the one hand, *samitis* oftentimes create pressure to prematurely jump into action. On the other, *samitis* tend to prevent

others in the village from being involved in the process and from interacting with outsiders. Hence, it was felt by the DEBATE/AEA team that the formation of a single village *samiti* would not be in harmony with the spirit of participatory conceptualisation. The strategy adopted was to let the *samitis* form but not to give them any special privileges or resources, and to simultaneously make sure that the team continued to interact with a wide range of people in the village.

Ownership by villagers

As the dialogue deepened, there was less and less attempt by the villagers to mould the conversations to the DEBATE/AEA team's liking. Instead, the dialogue was to a large extent guided by the villagers themselves. Many times, the normal code of conduct in social gatherings was broken.

Often, young people would speak in front of elders. Opinions were divided across generations and intense debates took place over many issues. Many of the large group discussions would also take off on their own. People would start talking among themselves and would forget the DEBATE/AEA team was there. Throughout the process, the DEBATE/AEA team tried to act as nurturers, inserting provocative questions and invoking dissonant comparisons to stimulate thinking and

expand the scope of the dialogue. These provocative questions had tremendous pedagogical value in regenerating the collective thinking processes of the village.[32] Two broad categories of questions were pursued – appreciative questions and foundational questions (discussed in the next section) – to re-establish people's confidence in their own ideas and their own capacities. Provocative questions were used to try to wean people off their dependency on government agencies, market forces and NGOs.

Self-Organizing Dialogues: Content

AR by definition aims at social change. As Wheatley (1999: 4) points out: *"People, like all life, only change when they allow an event or information to disturb them into voluntarily letting go of their present beliefs and developing a new interpretation… Change occurs when we let go of our certainty – our beliefs and assumptions –*

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[32] Paulo Freire (1989: 40): "Human existence, because it came into being through asking questions, is at the root of change in the world. There is a radical element to existence, which is the radical act of acting questions… I think that it is important to note that there is an undeniable relationship between being surprised and asking questions, taking risks and existence. At root human existence involves surprise, questioning and risk. And, because of all of this, it involves action and change. Bureaucratization, however, means adaptation with a minimum of risk, with no surprises, without asking questions."

and willingly create a new understanding of what's going on." In the context of participatory conceptualisation, this means letting go of the 'certainty' of pre-defined frameworks of development and education, of existing relationships within the village and between villager and outsiders, of dominant perceptions about the past and future, and of the culture of silence.

To support this process, the DEBATE/AEA team focussed on two categories of inquiry: appreciative frameworks and foundational questions. These were the two main and original 'instruments' used in this Action-research. The DEBATE/AEA team moved back and forth quite fluidly between these two categories during any particular conversation and it is important to note that both sets of questions were asked with a great deal of authenticity. The strategy for deepening the dialogues and enabling the evolution of diverse ideas was to situate any theme or issue raised by the villagers within the larger framework of understanding the systems that influence this issue. In addition, the team tried to link the issue back to the villagers' capacities and responsibilities to do something.

Appreciative Frameworks

The entire process of dialogue was carried out in an appreciative framework. Appreciation is an act of valuing and honouring – an act of recognising the best

in the people or the world around us, affirming past and present strengths, successes and potentials, perceiving those things that give life to living systems, and envisioning what might be (Cooperrider 1998). The appreciative framework seeks to make a forceful shift away from the development deficit perspective. The point is not to ignore the negative aspects of peoples' lives or romanticize harsh realities, but to create new ways to illuminate the 'roots of the problem', and to work with people to create their own reference points for the future. Inherent in the appreciative framework are processes of confidence-building, healing and trust-building. They are essential for any authentic and organic creative action to emerge.

Dialogue focussed primarily on the strengths the villagers already possessed – what they were able to do well. Much of the conversation centred on achievements: different social bonds, natural resource conservation, indigenous knowledge systems, media and learning processes – in other words, on how people did things themselves without any outside intervention by state or market institutions. There was a strong effort made to construct with the villagers a shared 'story' (without compromising the complexities and nuances) about the life of the village. All the content of the dialogues was based

on past knowledge and experiences — both of the villagers and the DEBATE/AEA team. This ensured that the critical analysis of the present situation began from the histories of the villagers. The process also explored how caste and religious formations played a role in the village, without trying to impose a political correctness on village practices. Some of the questions raised included:

- *How old is the village? What have been the significant events in the history of the village? (For women) what was the village like when you got married and came to the village?*

- *What do you plant in your fields? Since when have you been planting these crops? What did your grandfather plant in these fields?*

- *Where do you get the water for your crops and animals from? Is this the same source as before? How do you manage water resources? In your grandfather's time, how did they manage water resources? In times of drought, what did they do?*

- *What illnesses do you go to the doctor for? When there were no doctors how did you treat illnesses? Where did you go? How did you learn about local remedies?*

- *What kinds of items for your personal daily use do you produce in the village? What kinds of items come from outside*

the village? Which of these did you produce in the village before? Why did this change?

- *What are all of the kinds of skills that you learned outside of school? How did you go about learning these? What were the essential principles that guided the learning process?*

This appreciative framework was particularly important for dialogue with the elders, "*What do we know, we have not been to school. We are ignorant and illiterate.*" However, with the onslaught of formal schooling, much of the people's local knowledge had become hidden. It was difficult to bring it out through formal techniques as people were afraid, ashamed and reluctant to share their knowledge. So the DEBATE/AEA team pointed out skills, relationships and knowledges that villagers possessed to break mental blocks and to trigger new perspectives, insights, behaviour and action, for example:

- *Hal mein keel tukhwane ke liye uski padhai ka star jan kar kya karenge? Usko keel achchi tarha se thokni aani chaheeye.* ("Are you going to ask the schooling level of the blacksmith before getting your plough repaired by him?");

- *Agar aap aapne aap ko ek aisa aadmi se tholo jisne kheti per bahut kitabe padhee ho lekin kabhi kheti nahee*

kiyee ho. Kya woh kheti ke bhare mein aap se jyada jaanta hoga jabki aap tho saalon se khethi ke gyan ka istemaal roj karte aa rahe ho? ("If you compare yourself with a person who has read a lot of books about farming but has never done farming himself, will he know more about farming than you, who has been practically using farming knowledge for so many years?").

These interactions invariably led the villagers to view themselves in a more positive light – as a collective group with power rather than as a deprived group, as helpless, as ignorant fools, or as beggars. Such a state of mind encouraged people to think and say what they feel is right and must be. It altered the way people looked at the present and the future, and what they can themselves do to create their own futures. It allowed them to see their problems and resources differently.

The untapped potential and collective strength within the village as a whole was also stressed. This sensitivity grew so powerful that, after several days, one group of villagers themselves posed the question one night: "*If we have so much knowledge and wisdom, then where is the problem?*" Soon after, they answered themselves, "*Maybe we are not properly using the knowledge that we have.*" In other villages, the local people started talking about *ekta* (unity and

interdependence) as an important phenomenon in their villages. They felt that it was important to start examining why it was deteriorating and how it must be strengthened if the village is to flourish. Such questions opened up new possibilities for collective action.

Foundational Questions

Building on the appreciative framework, the DEBATE/AEA team also tried to raise several foundational questions about the changes in the village that have come with development as well as the role, positive and negative, of the school in the village. Such questions sought to understand the roots of different phenomena, frameworks, laws and institutions. These questions consciously challenged the local, district, nation, international power structures, instead of taking them as immutable. This involved identifying the various sources of information that influenced the attitudes and priorities of the villagers. Foundational questions explored the dependency level of individual villagers and the village as a whole, the structures and frameworks that deepened this dependency, and the implications of this dependency for their collective future.

In addition, the foundational questions tried to re-energize genuine learning spaces that would enable villagers to reflect on their own meanings of and experiences with justice, equality, happiness, success, peace, love, freedom, responsibility, unity, diversity, interdependence, adulthood/

childhood. Some of the questions asked were:

- *Has development benefited/harmed you and your community? In what ways has your life and other villagers' lives improved/deteriorated in the past fifty years, e.g., economic status of the community; social relations; political relationships; control and decision-making; awareness; creativity; skill level of groups, and in other ways?*

- *Who is considered to be a good human being in the village? What makes him so? What special qualities do they have? How did they learn these qualities?*

- *How has school been valuable to your current life? What are you learning from school that you are utilising in your life? What are graduates of your school doing today?*

- *What skills and qualities does your child need to learn to be successful and happy in life? What learning opportunities does your child have to develop these?*

The DEBATE/AEA team quickly learned that asking these questions directly in an abstract form sometimes led to confusion and pin-drop silence among the villagers. They therefore tried to raise these in different ways:

- One way was to share village *kahavath* (folk sayings) such as, *Kam parde to har se gaye, jyada parde to ghar se gaye* ("Those children who study a little give up the plough, those who study a lot leave the village") and *Uttam kheti madhyam ban; nikrisht chakri bheekh saman* ("Farming is the best among all occupations. Service (job) is like begging and worse than trading"). Villagers were asked to reflect on where these sayings came from and what they actually meant. Did their own personal experiences support or refute these sayings?

- Another method was to present experiences expressed by different individuals in the village to the larger group of people. Then, they would explore why these phenomena were happening, what was behind them, what were the implications for the village. For example, some artisans told the DEBATE/AEA team about a problem which was then shared with everyone: "*The cobbler, utensil maker, potter, and others have to compete with the branded products from the market which are cheaper and have social prestige associated with them. The tendency of the present day consumer is to get instant products, irrespective of whether they are specifically made for them. People have no patience to wait.*" The rest of the villagers were then asked to explain why they thought this was happening. Why were the villagers losing their patience? What would happen to the artisans and to the village if this continued? What are the institutions, laws, or media behind these products and who controls them?

- A third method consisted of exploring how and why their procurement patterns for daily consumable items had changed over the past 25 years. In the past, villagers produced everything except salt in the village — clothes, food grains, cosmetics, cooking fuel, house repair materials, spices and oil, footwear, sweetener, medicines and utensils. However, at present, everything, except some food grains, were being purchased from the city markets. What did this change mean for the local economy? What kinds of pressure did this increasing dependency on the cash economy place on the villagers?

- Institutions, such as schooling, were critically questioned by probing the promises associated with them. For example, many people had articulated that schooling was supposed to provide one with a government job. The DEBATE/AEA team asked several questions in response to this: "How many young people are getting jobs? What happens to those youth who do

not get a job? If your child does not get a job, what will he or she do? What are the essential things for your children/you to learn to survive in case they/you don't get a government job?"

- Another method the DEBATE/AEA used was to highlight latent internal contradictions in the lives of the villagers. These paradoxes arose from comparisons between phenomena at the micro- and macro-levels, the past and present time, across families and across villages. By posing them, people were challenged to confront previously unexpressed and unaddressed tensions and confusions. Several personal stories, based on individual villagers' experiences, were carefully presented to further draw such paradoxes. For example, the story of Dhariyav Singh who has studied up to Class 12, was shared by his father: "Educating my son has made him handicapped and dysfunctional. Today, he can neither work in the fields nor is he able to get a job." This was juxtaposed against the story of Santoshbai whose two elder sons did not go to school, but instead decided to learn carpentry through an apprenticeship. (It is important to note that the DEBATE/AEA team did not judge either of their decisions as 'bad'). This did not mean however that they did not want schools as we also have

examples of those who did get jobs. The large group discussion then went on to draw out the paradox that resides in these facts. These personal stories were continuously interwoven with larger systemic questions, so that conversations did not just consist of anecdotes but deepened understanding around shared questions.

- One other method used by the DEBATE/AEA team was to ask villagers to compare and contrast different past and present decisions and practices. For example, foundational questions were raised about what was sown in the fields and how it was sown. The older generation maintained that sowing *jowar* (grain) was more productive and useful, while the younger generation maintained that soya bean was a better crop. A long, intensive debate followed, where the villagers discussed the pros and cons of sowing the two, going so far as to calculate investment and output, other uses of the crop, length of time it takes to harvest, season of sowing, dependency on the market, and freedom of choice with crops. Questions about the larger political and economic system and its links to agricultural practices began to emerge. Several members of the older generation further shared their concerns about the shift in the relationship between the farmer and his land: "Earlier agriculture used to be a

way of life, it had now become a purely commercial activity."

As the conversations on diverse themes unfolded, the underlying linkages between these seemingly divergent areas started to become clear. For example, linkages were made between government policies, agricultural practices, socio-cultural relationships, schooling and television, and other learning spaces. Engaging with the whole instead of disassociated parts is necessary for thinking and acting together. The aim of this process was to create new learning opportunities and to regenerate traditional spaces (including school) by the villagers themselves to face the challenges that their communities encounter.

Foundational questions, appreciative re-evaluation and critical analysis each contain specific content: opinions, assumptions, and experiences. For these to emerge, we need a process that supports meaningful and connected exploration. Darling-Hammond (1992) further draws our attention to the dialectic relationship between process and content and its implications for education. She argues that the over-use or misuse of 'first-order' educational indicators and frameworks such as enrolment rates, test scores, and so on, almost inevitably leads to superficial first-order solutions. Furthermore, when certain easy answers

present themselves, there is little incentive to look below the surface for more profound systemic problems. To do so, requires a far more complicated and 'messy' process of questioning, analysis, discussion, negotiation and creation than what happens in either the collection of educational indicators or in their application.

The process and content of participatory conceptualisation must be self-organizing. This means that rigid, pre-planned designs and formulas, tools and training programs must be discarded. Self-organization is not about forcing things to happen, but about relationships forming naturally and meaningful structures taking shape as a process unfolds. Self-organization rests on the following assumptions:

- People only support what they create, and so must participate in the things that affect them;

- Order is not imposed externally. Instead, it emerges naturally when people themselves desire to take the responsibility of defining the direction of change and acting, by disorganizing what exists to reorganize towards what is desirable;

- Individuals understand that there is more benefit to all of them when they work together for common purposes

rather than when they compete against each other for egotistical ends;

- Solutions to problems already exist among people, and what is required is for people to pool their experiences and information together for new ways and meanings to be created or regenerated (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers 1996).

The content of participatory conceptualisation is generated through dialogue. It should be clarified that dialogue is not problem solving, group therapy or conflict resolution, but rather a mutual exploration of thought processes. Bohm and Nichol (1996) explain, "*Perhaps most importantly, dialogue explores the manner in which thought is generated and sustained at a collective level. Such an enquiry necessarily calls into question deeply held assumptions regarding culture, meaning, and identity. In its deepest sense, then, dialogue is an invitation to test the viability of traditional definitions of what it means to be human, and collectively to explore the prospect of an enhanced humanity.*" Over time, dialogue leads to a formation of shared purpose and shared meaning. Within this, however, there is still space for the individual to hold a separate opinion. Real dialogues have no controlling authority, no hierarchy – power is shared freely and naturally. Dialogue occurs in an atmosphere where everyone is considered equal and has the space to speak his/her mind. Dialogue is not fixed or closed. On the contrary, a genuine dialogue will witness constantly changing participants and schedules. The dialogue group will exist only as long as it is deemed necessary by the people involved.

This, then, is a brief description of Participatory Conceptualisation as it took place in the initial phase of this research. It gave us an insight into learning in a community. It is obvious that we cannot describe in detail all our findings, which went far beyond our original concerns, in those few months. The deeper we probed into the questions, the more we realise how little we really knew. In the following section we will present our findings on our initial objectives concerning school and its links with the learning environment.

DISCOVERING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

This Action-Research revealed knowledge concerning various domains of local life and its recent development. This forced us to consider the question of education in the context of life, culture, personal history and environment, rather than within that of school alone. Hence, 'education' no longer appears as an isolated need that could be treated in an isolated manner in school – and more or less prioritised with regards to the other needs of the people – but rather a priority aimed at developing a better understanding of their life situation and its environment, such that they are able to exercise choices in whichever field that may be of concern to them for real personal and community empowerment.

The two broad categories of questions which interested us in the beginning were: The perception of the field actors of 'education' and 'schooling' and the different learning needs, systems and spaces of the people. We have tried to synthesise the answers brought by this AR[33].

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[33] For details see report on the findings entitled, Education: Identification and Development of Learner-Based Systems, Debate/Aide et Action, December 2001.

Perceptions of communities on education and schooling

The research team had four main questions in mind:

- What do the communities mean by 'education'? (*shiksha kya hai*)?

- How do they describe an educated person? (*shikshit vyakti kaun hai*)?

- How does school contribute to forming such educated persons? (*kya vartman school shikshit aadmi ke banane mein koi bhoomika nibhata hai*)?

- Why do families send or not send their children to school? (*Parivaron mein bachchon ko school kyon bheja jata hein ya kyon nahi bheja jata hein*?)

In the dialogues, one main guiding question took up any one of these issues and the discussion that followed included many follow-up questions. A total of 332 group discussions and 73 individual interviews focused on this issue of education and schooling.

What is education?

Ramsaran Meena (55 years old) from Sagar reflects what most elderly men and women from the different villages have to say. "*In the past, education meant much more than literacy. It implied having knowledge and the ability to use it.*

However, over the last forty years, the introduction of modern schooling in villages has gradually transformed this meaning. It now more or less connotes school and whatever happens in it." The team tried to understand, through group discussions and individual interviews with the elderly, exactly what they meant by that and the reasons for this change. They believe that people in the past were employed on the basis of their skills which were known and recognized inside the village and around it. No one verified whether they knew how to read and write. "*Mending a plough or a roof requires a certain expertise in the domain, not literacy. Presently, they say, jobs in the factory or in the government services are* *inaccessible to the non-literate. Genuine knowledge and skills that one may have do not carry the same weight as a school certificate".* Apart from the fact that education implies reading and writing, most people tend to automatically link it to getting a job.

The following table reflects the opinion of the younger adults and also demonstrates the progress of a group conversation during the research process and some contradictions in their responses. Most young adults like the elderly, spontaneously link 'education' to 'reading and writing'.

Core question - What is education?	Follow-up questions
Men - to be able to read, write and calculate - to be able to use literacy skills to obtain information - To be able to count money **Women** - to be able to read and write - to be able to sign - whatever is taught in schools	**Can a non-schooled person calculate?** We can calculate without necessarily going to school. On the other hand all those who have been to school are not necessarily good at calculating. **Can a non-literate count money?** A non-literate cannot recognize currency notes. *But some members of the concerned group challenged this opinion and asked a non-literate to identify different currency notes (at Fadalpur)*

Another exchange with a group of men on the same topic:

> ***What is education?***
> Education means that the person knows how to calculate
>
> ***What sort of calculations?***
> To sell grains in the market.
>
> ***Could you give an example?***
> If you want to sell 3 and a half sacks (3.5 quintals) of soybean at the market and the buyer quotes Rs 773.50 per quintal. Then you should be able to calculate how much you will receive.
>
> ***Is this impossible for the non-literate or for those who have never been to school?***
> No, no. They too know how much the buyer will give.
>
> ***But you were saying that the non-literate cannot calculate (laughter).***
> No that's not true.

The youngsters too, related education to literacy skills. The literate youth in particular felt that reading enables one to understand information coming from outside the village. When asked to think of the main sources of information, they identified television, radio, newspapers and informal discussions in the neighbourhood. When the research team drew their attention to the fact that out of these, only newspapers require literacy skills and the group admitted that the non-literate can also procure information and can even be information sources themselves.

Education, for young women, both literate and non-literate, exclusively meant reading and writing skills. This was true also for children who thought that education was all about schooling and the learning of the alphabet and arithmetic.

Ramsaran Meena's observation was confirmed with each of the other categories of people: adult men, women, youth and children. The first tendency of people is to define education in terms of the literacy skills ensured by the schooling process. Besides, the answers seem to be conditioned by the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) – ability to count notes, write letters, or getting information being typical TLC messages. The repeated campaigns of the state and NGO in favour of schooling no doubt lie behind the change of meaning that Ramsaran Meena spoke of. When we go deeper into the question, we realize that education actually means a lot more to the people and has a very large connotation, almost the same as what Jomtien defined in 1990.

Who is an educated person?

Certain terms are repeatedly used to describe an educated person. Extracting the meaning attached to these terms was generally a long process. This was true of the literate and the non-literate.

The elderly:

Core Question	Follow-up Question
Who is an educated (shikshit) person?	*Does 'being literate' and 'being an educated person' mean the same to you?*
A person who is understanding (*Samajdar*), practically knowledgeable (g*yani*) and intelligent (*budhiman*) A person who has the ability to build and maintain social relationships (*Aachar Vyavhaar*)	No. The literate: - are often arrogant - do not respect elders - only talk about cities - do not engage in any manual work - think that the village culture and traditions are stupid - An educated person can be anyone, not just the literate. In the Sagar, Pagara, Ahirkhedi and Khairaee panchayat, a non-literate person was identified as a model educated person. In the Awan panchayat the person identified was literate (completed primary schooling).

Men (old and young) focussed on the same criteria : *samajdari* (someone who understands things*), gyani* (someone who is practically knowledgeable*) , buddhimaan* (someone who is intelligent*) and aachaar-vyavahaar* (someone who can maintain social relations).

- S*amajdari* literally means 'understanding': People's connotations revolve around the ability to recognise and anticipate problems, handle them with maturity and make good judgements.

- Similarly, G*yani* means 'knowledgeable': People understand it as the ability to use knowledge to solve problems. The two often quoted examples were, 'one who can educate us about our own scriptures' and 'one who is able to guide us in dealing with our daily problems'.

- *Buddhimaan* means intelligent. People's connotations centre around the ability to react intelligently in the market or in emergency situations like snake or scorpion bites.

- *Aachaar-vyavahaar* means understanding and maintaining social relationships. For men this was an important characteristic of an educated man.

Women too focussed on notions of *samajdhari* and good *aachaar-vyavahaar*. *Samajdhari*, in the case of women, meant using one's brains at work. The examples given related to daily chores like cooking, cleaning, working in the fields, plastering the house and talking to people. *Aachaar-vyavahaar* meant good social behaviour and respect for others. In ten out of the 14 villages surveyed, the model educated person identified by women was not literate.

Women:

Core Question	Follow-up Question
What is an educated person?	*Does being literate and being an educated person mean the same to you?*
A person who is understanding A person with a good behaviour (*achcha vyavhaar),* respect towards the elderly and women, and having traditional values and customs.	- No. An educated person is well balanced and does not exploit others. - Most of the atrocities are in fact committed by the literate. For example, the government officials are all literate. - An educated person is more concerned about values and morality. A literate person usually is more concerned about money and material things.

The youth define an 'educated person' as one who is well informed about certain things, generally alien to the village: availability of jobs, latest films, the Kargil[34] war, decisions taken in Delhi/Bhopal. Children do not differentiate between 'education' and 'literacy'.

Except for children and youth, all groups clearly distinguish between a schooled and an educated person. A deep dialogue process was however necessary to highlight this distinction. 'Education' implies attitudes and social behaviour of individuals, deep knowledge on issues of concern to the villagers, capacity to react in problem situations, to understand and constructively react to changes in the environment. The SIDH study too highlights the fact that people use 'education' and 'literacy' interchangeably. The fact that only illiterates distinguish between the two, is proof enough according to SIDH that modern education is responsible for blurring this significant distinction.

Most researchers in education themselves muddle up the two terms without blinking an eye. The PROBE study for example stated that 'education' is not just schooling or literacy, but equated the two terms right

through their report. Reacting to a newspaper article which wrote, *'illiterate parents in villages see no reason in sending their children to school'*, PROBE concluded that it is a myth to say that '*parents are not interested in their children's education'* (p.14). '*Not sending to school*' is indeed not the same as '*not interested in education*'. 80% of the people in the PROBE research felt that '*education*' should be made compulsory (Chart 2.7, p. 14). Such a statement seems inconsistent with the rest of the observations made in the report or incomplete taken on its own. Making 'education' compulsory means making 'schooling' compulsory. The same section mentions that *"the typical father and mother are very keen that their children should receive good education. It is another matter that they do not always have much faith in the schooling system's ability to impart such education"*. This confusion needs highlighting because there are millions of men and women who possess knowledge and expertise in various fields considered more important than reading and writing, but in the widespread culture of schooling they are all considered as 'uneducated'.

What is the role of school in forming educated people?

Schools are perceived, by those interviewed, to nurture individuals who lose

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[34] The border frictions between India and Pakistan in 1999.

faith in their own traditions and culture and look down upon the village life, who are inspired by an urban life-style and long to acquire it and who probably have expression skills but rarely do any work. All adult groups indicated that a certain degree of alienation takes place as a result of literacy. For men this means that the literate reject their own cultural roots and look down upon them. For women this means that the literate are not willing to undertake manual labour. The literate themselves had a negative image of their own village and compared it often to life in cities. Rahnema (1997: 159) wrote about this excluding and divisive action of school: *"the instilling in children in homeopathic doses, of new alienating values….drives them to reject or even despise their own cultural and personal identity"*. Many groups gave examples of how the literate are self-centred and exploitative in their relationship with the others. They often referred to government employees who are literate but rarely helpful. One could therefore conclude that school does not produce an 'educated person' as defined by the people in our research area.

There is nothing new about these findings. People however do send their children to school. This contradiction was brought to their attention. Many of those who do indeed send their children to school have rational reasons for doing so. They too feel the brunt of this 'excluding action' of schools and say so. We therefore decided to delve deeper into these concerns and discovered what people perceive as the role of schools in a larger framework of education.

Why are children sent to school?

It is important to note that when school is mentioned, the first reaction of people is to say that all children are sent to school. In the course of a conversation, this usually changes to '*they don't go daily as they have to work*' before finally settling down to '*we seldom send the child to school. The schoolmaster came and wrote everybody's name. But we don't send all the children to school, especially girls*'. In most cases, families have deliberately decided to send only one out of three or four children to school. They consider schools as a lottery ticket to jobs and prefer to let some children learn family work.

Core Question	Follow-up question
Why do you send your child to school?	*What do you mean by a better life/secure future?*
- Children can have a better life - Children will have a secure future - They can read signs and so travel is easy. - Children can read and write like you urban people do. - They can have a peaceful and comfortable life. - One can identify currency - School is the only place where we can acquire reading and writing skills. For the rest we learn from our daily life by seeing, experimenting, discussing and so on. - To be able to count - To get 3 kgs of wheat.	- Able to earn more money - Able to get a good job - To be rid of the 'illiterate' stigma (*ganwar*) *Can a person who has not been to school travel?* - Yes, definitely - One does not have to go to school to be able to travel - You simply ask the conductor or driver where the bus is going *How will children benefit out of reading and writing skills?* - can get a good job - can access government schemes - can confront government officials

In the beginning, most responses of the old and young revolved around the idea of having a better life and a secure future. The ensuing discussions consistently revealed that 'better life' and 'secure future' meant 'getting a good job' and this usually means a government job as a *patwari* or *tehsildar*, teacher or police. The youth clearly lacked enthusiasm for agriculture. While women are more concerned about moral values and the necessity to imbibe them in school, men are usually focused on the role of school to get their children a job and getting rid of adjectives like *ganwar* (villager), *anpadh* (illiterate), often used to describe them.

The research team often provoked reflection among people and left them to debate amongst themselves. The following two dialogues illustrate this process:

Conversation among Youth at Pagara

*Facilitator (F)***:** *Why are children sent to school in your village?*

Group (G): To become intelligent

F: W*hat kind of intelligence*?

G: Able to know everything (*sab kutch jaan lega*)

F: *What will he know*?

Member 1: He will know the capital of India and Madhya Pradesh. He will know who the Prime Minister is

Member 2: How will this information be useful to the village?

Member 1: He can write letters to the Prime Minister on the problems of the village

Member 2: You have gone to school and have studied up to class 12. How many letters have you written so far?

Member 1: That is not the issue here

Member 2: It is. You cannot write a letter to the Collector or the BDO (Block Development Officer) after studying up to class 12. Your father did not send you to school to write letters to the Prime Minister

The conversation was then interrupted with arguments on what each person had done for the village. After 10 minutes the conversation was brought back to the main topic

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Another Group discussion:

Can someone who has never been to school recognise currency notes?

Group (G): A child who has been to school can identify currency notes

Facilitator (F): *Does everybody in the group agree*?

G: Yes (collectively)

F: What does that mean exactly?

G: To be able to distinguish between a hundred and a fifty rupee note

F: Is there anyone in the group who has never been to school?

G: Yes, Mangilal

The facilitator took out a hundred and a fifty rupee note and asked him to distinguish between the two. Mangilal had no difficulties in doing so. The facilitator then gave him a ten and a twenty rupee note. Mangilal had no problems. The same with coins. He was even asked to add up currency and do some calculations. He managed all of it successfully.

F: Mangilal has never been to school, yet he can recognise bank notes and calculate money

G: That's not the thing

F: Then what is it?

G: (Laughter and a gradual change in opinion). Yes even people who have never been to school, can identify money

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When the rural youth asked why they think one should go to school, they automatically reply *'to talk like you (the facilitator)'*, or *'to move around like you'* or *'to earn like you do'* or *'to be able to live in a city and get a job'*. According to them this is possible only when one goes to school and is able to get a government job. The general impression is that a desk job means "just sitting and earning a salary". All literate youth who do not have a government job consider themselves 'unemployed'. Running a private school or engaging in a family occupation is not considered meaningful employment. As a second choice, they would rather run small shops. The income earned out of agriculture is considered disproportionately low compared to the effort put in.

The women who send their children to school usually do it for the following reasons:

- To read and write and get a job;

- to write letters to parents after marriage;

- to shop in cities;

- to write their own applications to government.

The research team often heard these women say '*girls should study and that's it*,' but did not succeed in extracting any specific explanation on what they meant by that. Although all women insisted on the necessity of moral values, they agreed that merely sending the child to school does not ensure values. They believe that reading and writing will enable them to 'learn these values' and 'adopt certain behavioural patterns.' Children themselves were very clear that they were in school in order to get a job. The jobs they dream of are usually those expressed by the adult group.

In conclusion, despite their analysis of the negative impact of school, people attribute three main roles to it : the potential of giving their children jobs (and since jobs in the villages are limited, it essentially means jobs in cities); teaching them to read and write in the dominant language, and enabling them to 'imitate' and link with the dominant culture.

Regarding the first role of school, the PROBE study reached a similar conclusion but adds that, '*the social perceptions of*

what constitutes 'quality education' are unfortunately influenced by the dominant value system of joining the ranks of government employees and urbanised middle class. These perceptions may improve in the future and this should be seen as one part of the long-term agenda of transforming the education system. The more immediate problem is that of quality education…such as adequate facilities, responsible teachers, an active classroom and an engaging curriculum'.[35] School is a tool of the dominant value system and hence cannot but influence common perceptions. Besides, there is no other 'perceived return' from school, so their perceptions are perfectly rational and lead to rational choices.

Another major concern of people is to learn to read and write. In a traditionally oral society, families consider school as the only space where they can acquire literacy skills and therefore wish to preserve it. They feel the need to acquire this tool and hence take the necessary measures by sending one or two children from the family.

As for the third role of school, it helps people overcome the low self-esteem they experience and for which we have seen in

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[35]The Probe Team 1999: 26-27.

a preceding section that school in fact has its own share of responsibility. Through schooling, adults would like to be rid of humiliating adjectives like *ganwar* or *anpadh* which are often used to describe them and youngsters would like to 'talk like the researchers'.

The research shows to what extent, in people's perceptions, the role of school is limited in accomplishing the larger vision of education that national and international institutions wish to promote.[36] They try however to realise this vision through other means and other spaces which we will examine later.

Why are children not sent to school?

Despite being enrolled, children are not necessarily sent to school on a daily basis.[37] Our questions therefore relate to attendance rates in schools (around 30 to 40%) and not enrolments.[38]

The majority of families send only one out of three or four children to school. Apart from the fact that this ensures that can families satisfy some of their literacy needs, schooling of one child provides the family with a remote possibility of a job and a steady income. They know that schooling today does not guarantee a job and that an unemployed schooled child does not contribute to the family income. Instead he becomes a burden.

Children not enrolled in school are educated in the fields. Most parents believe that these children learn to rely on multiple skills in order to survive and have no complexes with regards to manual work. They thus ensure an education that they consider useful and necessary for the survival of the family. The economic status of the family has a major role in deciding the number of children going to school. If one child is found particularly successful in school, he is allowed to continue. Families do not want their daughters to leave the village for a job and so see no reason to send them to school. When we tried to reflect on why girls are not allowed to leave the village, the common response was *'In our society we do not send them'*.

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[36] The Jomtien vision (World Declaration on Education for All 1990), ratified by India, visualises an education geared to tapping each individual's talents and potential, and developing learners' personalities, so that they can improve their lives and transform their societies.

[37] Table G.15 : Education: Identification of Learner Based Systems. Bhopal, India. AEA – Debate, 2001.

[38] The attendance rates are often exaggerated because teachers, in charge of maintaining attendance figures, operate under pressure from their supervisors and the community. Teachers are responsible for ensuring a good

attendance rate and are accountable to their supervisors for that. A minimum attendance of 90% makes a family eligible for 3 kilos of rice under the mid-day meal scheme. This entails pressure on the teachers from the community too.

Many youth who have either never been to school or have dropped out were happy about the choice they made. Most of them spoke about the freedom they have in agriculture or animal husbandry and about the '*real education*' acquired in these activities. Real education according to them is one that '*enables you to work and earn according to your abilities*'. Many children dropped out of schooling because they wanted to learn basket weaving, animal care or farming. Many others are simply not interested in what is being taught in school.

To summarise the opinions expressed by the groups, it appears that if a child has to work in the fields, he has to be prepared for the sun and the rain. His body has to adapt to ploughing and other agricultural operations, growing to take the load of hard labour. A child attending school is unfit for agriculture. On an average a child is exposed to the different agricultural operations at the age of 7 or 8.

The perception of families on the utility of school is deeply entrenched; school addresses a certain kind of need – literacy and a stable job. Otherwise it is seemingly more of a bother, when compared to the other activities which enable children to acquire basic skills required for meaningful subsistence and survival. Families want their children to be prepared for agriculture and consider that the required learning

takes place in the fields. Their choice therefore is a conscious and rational one.

What do they have against schools?

- The entire focus of school is on reading.
- School often does not even produce literate people. Most children who have completed class V cannot even read the name on the shop.
- Schooling is not helping people to get jobs.
- The people who teach our children do not have any understanding of the village. They can only teach how to read and write.
- People who have gone through school reject and look down upon the village life.
- The literate get jobs, manipulate and exploit people.
- When girls study too much (class 8), they do not participate in any household work.
- The current schooling system produces people who can speak well but do not do much.

The perception of opinion leaders and local representatives of the education system

We addressed the same questions to opinion leaders and local representatives of the State education system. They

confirmed that the school curriculum is not adapted to the local environment and does not enable communities to understand changes that affect them. On the contrary, they alienate the children.

In their opinion, schooling is a necessity for four reasons: getting a job, improving personality, overcoming exploitation and managing a better life. They are concerned about the decrease in the availability of jobs today and believe that youngsters should look for self-employment opportunities. Literacy enables them to access loans for self-employment. Having a school certificate allows mobility in the search for jobs, and this enables young people to understand the outside world and relate to it more openly, being able to converse freely with others. It is not in school that one learns to communicate. It only provides you with a passport to confront the dominant culture and in doing so, one automatically learns. On the question of exploitation, although they believe that schooling empowers an individual, they were not able to cite examples from the school curriculum that have been specially designed to combat exploitation. Empowerment, they claim comes from knowing how to read and write. They can write letters to the authorities in case of exploitation. The references to a 'better life' are most often those of modern life: availing oneself of

government development schemes, family planning, or government jobs.

They believe that children are kept from school because of a lack of awareness among parents and an inadequate curriculum, but also admit that schooling has not lived up to its promise. Many degree holders remain unemployed. Teachers themselves felt that the curriculum does not relate to the local context at all. People, they say, do not need to read and write in their daily lives and hence are not interested in acquiring these skills. In any case, all available literature on things that matter like land ownership, land transfer, market mechanisms, bank transactions and so on, is in a language that can only be understood by experts. Therefore people learn about them from expert sources, media, neighbourhood or personal experience.

On the question of sending just one child from a family to school, this group felt that previously people in their area were not dependent on the government. With a gradual introduction of government schemes in education, health, loans, marketing of local produce, seed and fertiliser distribution, housing and so on, literacy has become a necessity for filling in application forms. This is probably why

the communities choose to ensure that at least one member is literate. Knowing how to read and write is not the same as comprehension and expression. Moreover most government documents are written in a high form of Hindi.

The Jomtien conference (1990) declared that, "*basic learning needs …comprise both essential learning tools…and the basic learning content… required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning.*"[39] This section shows that people also think so. Everybody agrees that while school takes care of the tool of literacy, it does not cater to any other learning tool or content. With this understanding of what 'education' really means to the people and their perception of the role played by school, we then tried to understand how they organised themselves to meet other basic education needs, particularly the required learning tools and content which are not found in school.

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[39] World Declaration on Education for All 1990: 3.

The Learning environment

The research team had three core questions:

- What do they have to learn (the content)?

- Where do they learn (the spaces)?

- What are the criteria that characterise this learning (the processes)?

The team decided to contact groups at their place of activity and participate in it. During the discussions that took place, there were often strong differences of opinion between old and young resulting in intensive debates. These usually related to traditional learning spaces which are disappearing (community festivals and traditions) or to the invasion of TV and radio. Individual interviews consolidated the findings of group discussions. The community often recommended particular individuals in the villages known for their expertise on some specific indigenous knowledge or process. The information collected during individual interviews was shared in the group meetings to get more data and record relevant experiences.

We will first describe the learning spaces and content and then go on to explain the processes and other criteria which relate to learning in the community.

The learning spaces and content

By a 'learning space' we do not necessarily mean a formally structured place like school or a vocational training institute where one would go to learn things in an organised and institutionalised manner. Everyone comes across different spaces in life such as the family, the community, workplace, place of worship, market place, place of leisure, play, school, transport and so on. Each of these spaces is characterised by exchanges, activities and multiple temporary or permanent situations. Each one contains traditional and modern knowledge and possesses media such as tradition, festivals, art, song, music, prayers, radio, television, newspapers or simply 'experts' in order transmit this knowledge. The profound motivations of individuals determine their involvement in any space at any given moment in life. At that moment, that space becomes an important and determining source of learning. Each such space is organised and structured in a different way.

In this section, we have chosen to highlight, through 'livelihood' – an important learning space for all, including children – the traditional knowledge content which characterises these spaces, the means used to transmit these, the new learning needs created by local development programmes and the means deployed to meet these needs. At Guna, most families are engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry, labour in different sectors, forest, handicraft and small commerce.

Agriculture

Learning related to agriculture takes place in the fields or at home. All children, attending school or not, learn about soil conditions, seed quality, field preparation, sowing time, use of fertilisers, ploughing, weeding, water requirement, growth monitoring, harvesting, de-husking, cleaning, processing, storing and preparation for the market.[40] Each of these stages requires important decision-making on which depend not only the agricultural output, but also their survival. The families had been growing millet (*jowar*) and maize for a long time before being introduced to soybean, a cash crop. When soybean was first sowed by Kalyan, a farmer from Pagara, everybody visited his fields regularly till the crop was harvested. Children sometimes accompanied the adults or went to the field on their own to observe the crop.

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[40] This however does not mean that all children are prepared for agriculture. It is only those children who are engaged in agriculture, that are willing to work in the fields as adults. Most children who attend school consider agriculture as a secondary activity that they would not need to adopt in any case because of the promise of a white-collared job after schooling.

Irrigation, increase in cropping area, changes in the cropping pattern, use of technology, introduction of new fertilisers and seeds are some of the other major changes affecting agriculture in this area. Each of these changes provoked complex learning processes within the community. For example, the introduction of technology implied use of tractors, pumps or threshers. This entailed a need to learn to operate, maintain and repair the tool. This gave birth to new livelihoods: those of mechanics or technicians. In most cases, the farmers learnt by inquiry and observation of others using the equipment. A TV programme presented new fertilisers and seeds.

This however entailed new learning needs which have not always been satisfied. Consider the following examples:

- Girls are usually taught to make containers for grain storage and protection against insects. These containers are made with a mixture of clay, dung and straw. Previously home made and herbal pesticides were used in the fields. According to women after the introduction of soybean and new chemicals (used in insecticides and pesticides), many new kinds of insects have been noticed, making grain storage difficult. New chemicals and medicines have been introduced to the villagers, but women are unaware of the chemicals used in these pesticides.

- With the introduction of a canal, water became available throughout the year and the farmers could reorganise their cropping pattern. The farmers changed from maize and pulses to soybean and wheat and organised themselves to learn about seed quality, water requirement, probable diseases, fertiliser requirement and marketing. They also acquired new skills and attitudes in understanding and establishing a new water distribution system, thanks to the canal. However, the necessity of borrowing every year to buy seeds has added to their state of indebtedness which has been increasing over recent years.

- Similarly, farmers who were sold chemical fertilisers 20 years ago, are wondering why they are being asked to switch over to organic fertilisers today.

- Children who work in the fields and accompany their parents to the market have many questions too. Many of the children interviewed for example, would like to understand what determines market price or what determines a reduction in government subsidies.

In one of the group discussions, the research team provoked a debate between the elderly and the youth over the question of soybean. The elderly were not comfortable about this change in crop, while the youth insisted that they had taken the right decision in adopting the cash crop.

Our researchers facilitated this discussion by charting out the arguments of either side. A critical analysis of the two situations – before and after introduction of the cash crop – was undertaken.

When cultivating millet (*jowar*), the families earned less. They consumed part of what they grew and kept some seeds aside for the next year's crop. With soybean, they earn more but have to borrow money to purchase new seeds every year, because they do not have cash when they need to buy the seeds. They repay the loan and interest and have to buy food grains for themselves since they do not consume soybean.

This analysis showed that the overall cost of growing soybean was higher than that of growing millet.

Animal husbandry

Animal husbandry is a household activity and all those engaged in agriculture need to learn the basics of animal husbandry either for ploughing or for dairy activities. All the required learning takes place outside school, be it grazing, grass identification, preparation of animal fodder, hygiene of cattle and their sheds, animal disease and cure, preparation for calf delivery, milking or training oxen for ploughing. In case of serious animal ill-health, families refer to indigenous specialists in animal care. All these specialists have acquired their expertise outside schools. Many households engage in commercial dairy activities and learn all market-related matters like quality, animal

pricing, and distribution systems in the market.

The major changes affecting this activity were increase in markets, diversification from dairy to poultry for commercial purposes and de-forestation. The density of forests decreased and the area under cultivation increased in the villages. The grazing land and animal fodder decreased. There was an automatic pressure on existing resources which forced the communities to redefine and re-distribute common resources. For example, the National Fertilisers Limited bought the forest land at Ajroda, which was previously the fodder provider. This land becoming inaccessible, the villagers shifted to

another piece of land attributed to them for grazing. However the shortage of fodder on this land forced a new practice among farmers. The dairy farmers adopted commercial feeding for the animals meant for commercial purposes and grazing for their own herd. Every decision taken in the villages is a result of a self-learning process.

Labour

Labour usually means 'agricultural labour' for families that have no land. A large number of families depend on wages for their livelihood. Men engaged in ploughing are paid more than women in harvesting. Some children are engaged on a daily wage basis for grazing animals. Some families in Pagara, Awan and Ahirkhedi, are engaged in the GAIL (Gas Authority of India Limited) and NFL (National Fertilisers Limited) factories. Work in these factories involves loading and unloading, packing or construction. Other livelihood sources are house construction, animal grazing, firewood chopping or work in the nearest town. The place of work becomes a very important learning space where survival depends on what one learns. The wages in agricultural labour are fixed for the season and there is no room for negotiation. Many households that survive solely on labour enter into a contract with large landlords for the entire season – from ploughing to harvesting/de-husking and packing. The

rates for such households vary and a payment schedule is determined accordingly.

A major change in this sector is the wage pattern. Presently, labour is paid in cash, and the wages fixed on a 'per job' or 'per day' basis. In the past there used to be a combination of cash and barter. The work force had the option of an annual contract with the landlord or work as and when required. In both cases, the farmers were often paid in kind. In the case of an annual contract, a portion of the land used to be earmarked for the workforce and the harvest from this bit of land used to go to the latter. The landlord was responsible for the worker's family and the economic status of the latter reflected the landlord's status. At the end of the year, both the employer and the employee had the choice of re-negotiating the terms of the contract. In addition to this, farmers adopted a mutual co-operation system wherein they worked on each other's land (especially during harvest) and no cash or grain but rather labour was exchanged. The gradual switch over to cash payment has marginalized the labour force. Being paid partly in grains at least ensured that the families did not starve. Ram Bharose, farmer from Awan says, *"when the farmer was paid in food grains, it was on a kilo or a basket basis. It was not based on the market price of the product. The amount of*

food grain to be given was based on the quantity required to feed my family. But payments in cash do not take into account whether the amount given will be able to feed my family, because I take the cash and then go to the market and buy a number of things before cooking. The prices in the market keep on increasing, but wages do not increase every day. So there are times when I have to take a loan to feed my family."

Forest

The forest is another very important learning space. Some families depend on forest produce like gum*, chironji* (a type of seed which come from the bean family, used for chutney, achar, local medicines)*, katha* (bark of a tree, ground up and mixed in a betel nut preparation commonly chewed by men and women in India) for a living while others depend on it for house construction, animal shelter and firewood. The education process obviously has to do with the availability and locations of certain forest produce, identification of trees and plants, specific uses of trees, identification of different types of wood and its quality, the fruit and time for harvest, processing – drying, cutting, cleaning – transactions with forest officials, wood cutting techniques, branch sharing for selling, identification of different animals and birds, forest fire fighting, herb identification for indigenous medicine and so on. Bamboo is vital for the

basod community (involved in basket weaving). Their children learn very early to recognise the quality and age of bamboo and are taught bamboo cutting.

Nationalisation of forests in 1965 was a major event that seriously affected the communities' rapport with this space. The community lost ownership rights and new forest protection laws were imposed. Leela bai at Ahirkhedi recalls, "*We suddenly found ourselves paying for our wood or looking for permission from the department*". The forest department cut trees and sold them to contractors, but prevented communities from using the forest for household or livelihood purposes. The families are still struggling to deal with this change and handle their relations with the forest and the forest department. The learning involved, however incomplete, takes place in families, community spaces and with experts – in this case, forest department officials.

Cottage industry

Guna, our research zone, like most rural areas in India, is rich in cottage industries – cloth weavers, carpenters, blacksmiths, potters, leather, oilseed and bamboo processors and producers are common. These trades are caste-based and are learnt within families. The Vishwakarmas are carpenters, the Namdevs weavers/tailors and the Charamkars leather artisans, and

so on. Boys learn the art of making a pot but it is girls who learn to take care of preparing the clay, heating the pots and painting them. Both boys and girls learn to assess quality, to process raw material, to negotiate with clients, to assess the demand, and price the labour and product.

This learning takes place in the family and in the market. Many families, unable to deal with competition from industry, abandon traditional occupations and switch over to agriculture or migrate to cities in search of jobs.

Although there is striking absence of the use of reading and writing as a tool for learning in all these spaces – even by the literate – indigenous knowledge in numeracy in still alive and used. Distances, weights, sizes and proportions are measured in local units. Area is expressed in *bhigas*, distances in *kos* and weight of cereals in *ser*. They know how to convert these into acres, kilometres and quintals for outsiders. Everybody, literate or not, knows that a quintal is equal to one standard gunny bag of grain. Most children cannot reply to 'What is a kilo?' but when asked 'how do you measure grains?', they replied 'quintals/kilos/*ser*'.

Area measurement : from a hand to an acre!

6.25 hands *(haath)* = 1 stick (*latha)*

20 *lathas* = 1 *bissa*

20 *bissas* = 1 *bigha*

1.75 *bighas* = 1 acre

This conversion table is not taken from any school textbook and everybody in the community, literate and non-literate, knows it. A shift to the metric system by the government in 1956 forced the communities to learn to convert from their system to the new one. They sought the help of the *patwari* for the area and distance measurements, and that of the Agriculture Extension Officer for the weighing measurements. The families continue however to use the indigenous systems for their daily requirements. They have adopted the use the official metric system for the government representatives and other outsiders.

All the children interviewed are at ease with calculations when it comes to an example related to a concrete situation in life but some are lost when faced with an abstract problem. For example, the latter are confused when asked to multiply 20 by 25 but often have the right answer when asked how much it costs to buy 20 kilos of rice at 25 rupees per kilo. A child from the *basod* (basket weaving) community learns to assess the amount of bamboo required for a given basket size. In class when a problem of this kind was proposed to the children, they would automatically direct the research team towards their classmates from the *basod* community, considering the latter as experts in the matter. Under normal circumstances, the same children are looked down upon because they belong to an SC community and stand low in the social ladder. The villagers often refer to some mathematics experts in the villages for sophisticated calculations involving fractions. Women use geometrical figures like the triangle *(singhone)* and the square *(chaukone)* with precision in their drawings to paint the walls and the floor.

Family and community spaces

The community is divided into castes and sub-castes and the institutionalised power relations between and within these groups often determine political decisions. The reintroduction of the *panchayat* system and the related politics is a relatively recent phenomenon and has affected the social behaviour of the people.

Education about the caste system – the status of the caste, its history and its relation with regards to other castes, vocational work – is mainly acquired in families. School is an institution that defends the value of 'equality' and is supposed to put an end to the inherent inequalities of the caste system. Children from communities deprived of organised educational institutions for centuries had access to it. However it has had very little influence on the way people think about castes and the foundations on the system. Families continue to ensure this education.

Looking after siblings at home educates many children about childcare. They learn how to repair and maintain their houses in their families. Accompanying parents to the market helps children – especially boys because girls rarely go to the market – understand market dynamics: pricing, negotiating, bargaining, facing competition.

Health education takes place in the family or community and consists of identifying ordinary illnesses and administering an appropriate treatment. Local experts on indigenous medicine are solicited for complicated illnesses. Families do go to the Government Primary Health Centre, but rarely succeed in understanding the treatment being prescribed. In the case of indigenous medicine, the local expert or even families know and can explain the medical properties of the treatment being administered.

Family planning methods are learnt through social interactions in the hospital with the midwives and nurses, at home and through media. Both literate and non-literate women were equally aware of birth control techniques. Education on sexuality generally happens through peer groups.

What a child learns by attending caste and village meetings, observing the power dynamics and the media is often contradictory to what he has to learn by heart from the textbook. It is in fact more efficient for the child than the schoolbooks on civics. Elections provide an excellent forum for understanding the existing power structures. Many of the interviewed children, attending school or not, know why one votes and what the voting procedures are. Many children not attending school

were familiar with the difference between the State and the Central assembly. Every time the reservation policies concerning the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes[41] change, communities have to depend on rumours or information available from the government officials, media and opinion leaders in the community.

Finally, family and social events are important learning spaces for values and tradition. To make children understand and learn the customs and practices concerning an event, they are given responsibilities during the event depending on their age. Child birth, marriage and death are major family events where the child learns the importance of the event, the organisation of the rituals linked to each one of them, hierarchy in the family, roles of each family member, the meaning of birth or death and how to confront it. In the same way, village festivals provide excellent spaces to learn the importance of a festival, its religious connotation, the roles of the different social groups during the festival, its organisation and the artistic traditions linked to it.

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[41] Certain positive discrimination policies of the State benefit this category of castes and tribes.

The learning processes and other criteria

The team was interested in finding out whether age was an important factor for education for any given activity. They also wished to understand the main learning processes involved in these learning systems.

The age for education for any activity differed from family to family. Certain children are exposed to agriculture at the age of six, and others at the age of fourteen. The same applies to domestic chores. Contrary to what we imagine, it is not always the economic status of the family that decides the age at which a child contributes to any family activity. It can also be 'a pedagogical concern'. According to Radheshyam, a farmer from Fadalpur, "*Agriculture isn't easy. It requires a lot of time, work, skill and patience. You have to be prepared to face the sun, rain and cold wind in winters in order to work on the fields and have a good harvest. If a child is not trained early in life – i.e. at 6 or 7 years – he can never be a good farmer.*" Clearly, when all these activities surround the child in their daily lives, the child's learning is facilitated.

Besides, the changes in the environment, the discovery of a new occupation, and other particular circumstances forced many

people to engage in new activities and learn at all ages.[42] The carpenter at Sagar had to learn welding at the age of 40. Shivcharan, a youngster from Awan, after having finished his studies and spent three years in vain looking for a job, decided to come back to agriculture at the age of 23. Every time there is a problem or a new activity, they consult a lot of people in the community. Education generally consists of doing things and on the spot learning. People have their own criteria for quality and competence, be it for daily life activities, livelihood activities, community events or social relations.

Learning is centred around purposeful work, around doing and around experience. Consult, look, observe, do, practice, question, make mistakes are some of the processes which characterise these learning systems. The child is encouraged to ask questions, even though there are not always answers, and their mistakes are accepted as important stages in the learning process. A group of women who were weaving baskets in Guna said: "*Real learning comes out of mistakes; we*

therefore correct mistakes but encourage the child to continue the same activity". It takes place in the local language, so adults and children are able to fully express their experiences.

Families however regret the fading importance or in some cases the disappearance of certain spaces and traditional means like intergenerational learning, folk dance or song which according to them is due to the influence of television which has become the main source of entertainment in the villages.

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[42] 'Learners must be able to engage in new activity, as they move into new settings. This entails figuring out what the characteristics of the situation are, what its relation is to situations they already know, what there is to learn, and what new knowledge they need in order to be able to participate productively in the situation' (IRL s. d

www.irl.org/info/sevenprinciples.html)

CONCLUSION

The absence of school in local development processes

In conclusion, our findings show that school is representative of local development, but ironically has shut its eyes to the development dynamics in its surroundings. Local development is characterised by changes in the environment which force individuals to evolve, change occupations, practices, often their mind-sets and to search for new learning sources. Families try to adapt to this evolution and assess its advantages and risks at every stage. Sending just one out of three or four children is a very good example of this process. Communities also try to preserve what they consider fundamental values, but often regret not being able to preserve the spaces and the main tools needed to acquire them. This, they say, is due to the influence of modern life on the younger generation.

However, families are rarely aware of the macro-economic forces which govern these changes, do not understand the driving forces behind them nor the repercussions they can have on their own future. A young farmer for example accepts to grow a new crop or to use chemical fertilisers to satisfy his immediate needs and undertakes an intensive learning programme with the help of other farmers,

market agents, television, radio and personal experience. Generally it is those who are involved in the activity, literate or non literate, who are his best sources of information and explanation. Families believe that the school programme does not respond to these real learning needs and that the youngsters who have gone through schooling do not help them in understanding the issues better. Hence the conclusion that school is an isolated space, replying to other learning needs and criteria – reading, writing and memorising knowledge that does not relate to our world – where we would go in the hope that it gives us a certificate and probably a job in town.

Everybody seems worried about this isolation and looks for different ways to integrate school into the environment which we shall discuss later in this section. In the meanwhile we often hear the following:

- School cannot take the entire burden of educating a child. It has a role to play and other spaces have their own role. In that case can it carry the privilege of being the only outlet to empowerment? If not what are the other ways to encourage and how to go about it? The 'limited role' that school is supposed to have has to be clearly identified, and its relative importance for true empowerment needs to be admitted. It

should also be acknowledged that while some children do get jobs, many do not. If it cannot guarantee employment to all, can we conclude that it benefits all? Families have measured the relative importance of literacy (the other significant contribution of school) in their lives and have taken necessary measures by sending one child to school from the family. How can we then justify the need for schooling all children?

- Following a definition taken from a UNESCO document, the kind of learning described in the previous section is *informal* as it consists of *intentional but unorganised and unstructured learning events that occur in the family, the work place, and in the daily life of every person, on a self-directed, family-directed or socially-directed basis.*[43] One would then imagine that there is nothing much to do. School would continue in its role of transmitting a narrow framework of knowledge and values, and the individual continues to acquire others in his own environment, even if the former contradicts the latter. This research highlights three findings:

- The importance of these other informal spaces in the life of the individual.

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[43] UNESCO 1996.

- The extent of 'meaningful learning' accomplished in these spaces as against what is accomplished in school.

- The total absence of any link between school and the other informal spaces of learning which operate in a network.

Clearly, most families participating in this research consider school as a space that is neither more nor less important in replying to their education needs. It is of utmost importance to acknowledge this fact and support these informal initiatives and find a link between them and school. The appendix explains plans and approaches towards that aim.

School has its limits and if we wish to progress towards education for all and education for empowerment, we have to step out of this framework and be more imaginative and creative.[44] This document does not intend to ridicule the existence of schools (people themselves wish to preserve them), but rather to temper the enthusiasm for its all-empowering capacity

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[44] The Jomtien declaration (World Declaration on Education for All 1990: 4) admits as much: "To serve the basic learning needs of all requires more than a recommitment to basic education, as it now exists. What is needed is an expanded vision that surpasses present resource levels, institutional structures, curricula, and conventional delivery systems while building on the best in current practices."

unless it is prepared to change its role and accompany families in better understanding their environment.

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Program for Universalisation of Elementary Education in India proposes to emphasise quality and relevant education. One of its objectives is to render elementary education pragmatic and relevant by (a) improvement of the curriculum, (b) child centred activities (c) effective teaching methods. It also observes that "*relevant education would call for a greater role for observation and activity in the learning environment of children. The exclusive dependence on the textbook as a repository of all knowledge will have to give way to a learning environment that builds on the local context and allows the child to discover knowledge through activity and observation*."[45]

A topic that bounces back at every serious discussion on school is its integration with the environment. Several efforts have been made in this direction by NGOs and curriculum developers: adapting infrastructure to the local environment, recruiting local teachers, involving people through various committees or adapting the curriculum to the local context. We

have already discussed the first options in a preceding section and will briefly discuss here the question of curriculum.

Curriculum

Whether it is possible for a school curriculum to adapt to such diversity of content which is due to diversity of contexts is a question raised frequently. Our research was undertaken in five *panchayats* in the same block of one district. Each *panchayat* had its own contextual specificity: forest; canal; gas and fertiliser industry; national highway and one neutral location. Each area had different realities and related learning spaces and needs. It is difficult for a school programme to adapt to this diversity of needs. There are no ready-made solutions and therefore rather than debate the issue of content and medium,[46] we decided to undertake in our second phase an experiment emphasising learning processes like critical thinking, communication, co-operation, problem solving, decision-making, creative thinking, and management. These are issues and concerns which matter to the communities

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[45] Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan 2000: 10.

[46] Many experiments have already been conducted providing matter to nourish this debate. For example many studies conducted in remote areas have concluded that families wish to preserve English medium schools or at least have English taught in schools whereas for years pedagogues have been against the use of foreign language in primary schools.

and to the children in particular. In this phase, we would like to involve schools. The outcome of this phase will be known at a later stage.

However, it is not so much the content but rather the learning processes used in school which may help it come out of its isolation and give it a place in the local development dynamics. As long as a child is asked to memorise the content of a text book, however contextual it may be, with the aim of passing an exam, he or she is not 'allowed' to reflect, question, critique, form an opinion, or develop their own knowledge. They cannot express their own ideas, at least not inside the schools, which do not therefore contribute to their empowerment.

The diverse content of the school's surroundings every day is sufficiently representative of the development options that the country has chosen and that have an impact on the village. It seems therefore a waste of time that a group of experts reflect and propose content that the child should know. Children involved in animal husbandry obtain some relevant knowledge directly from their environment and look for extra complementary knowledge. Others are interested in agriculture and do the same. The added

value of school would be to bring this extra knowledge sought by people.

This does not mean forcing some more content on the children.[47] It just means changing the learning processes in class. This research illustrates the lack of certain *empowering learning processes* such as questioning, reflection, critical analysis, creativity, decision-making, interdependence, inter-generational learning and collective action in the education processes in the villages. What is emphasised in school is memorisation.

In the experiences of families which change their practices, adopt new ways and undertake a self-learning process, all children, those attending school and those not doing so, follow them in this self-organised initiative. The former are not better equipped than the latter to question these new ways and help families exercise choices. A critical analysis and reflection on the question of animal husbandry or agriculture as a livelihood activity, the relationship with animals or the earth, the commercialisation, the impact of the

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[47] PROBE notes that those who design the curriculum think that the children must know more today than before, given the knowledge explosion at the global level. (The Probe Team 1999: 77) It is true that every time there is an effort to develop the curriculum, it usually ends up with more to learn.

changes in the environment on the activity itself are some of the emancipating and *empowering learning processes.* Supporting these processes would put every child on the road to empowerment where they will reflect, question, analyse, form an opinion and display their own creativity – in short, will learn to learn and exercise choices, including those between modernity and tradition. Indeed, the empowerment processes presently engaged, which essentially are the development programmes of the state and NGOs, as well as the market forces have slowly but surely led people towards a development necessarily meaning 'modern ways', with promises of a better future. This has led to the adoption of modern knowledge and practices leaving behind their own logic, their practices, their knowledge and their own ways of living. This research also shows that the adoption of these modern ways has not always been empowering for the people who have not necessarily strengthened their abilities to choose, to negotiate and to decide.

These were some conclusions at this stage of research. It is not however sufficient to close the debate and propose miraculous solutions in terms of interventions. We are sufficiently convinced of the value of Participatory Conceptualisation in the field. It was used on an experimental basis and we have reason to believe that its

application in the field will further enrich both knowledge and practices. We are engaged in a process, and do not necessarily know what awaits us at the other end. Our conviction lies in the fact that there is tremendous wealth within the communities and that its discovery will be a guide to solutions.

APPENDIX: SECOND PHASE – SUPPORTING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

What do we mean by 'Liberate School'? The focus of most education programmes on schools leads us to imagine that the burden of educating all lies only on schools. 'Liberate School' intends to demonstrate the existence and the importance of other knowledge sources and systems and the need to encourage these in order to address education for all. 'Liberate School', unlike many other projects, does not aim at reforming schools. It will attempt to involve schools in action-research such that they themselves find a place in the learning web. Some Participatory Action-Research, which is based on the following new objectives, has been launched in three areas in India:

- Participatory conceptualisation as a process will help reduce the dependency points of communities, which would mark the beginning of a learning community;

- The recognition, validation and reinforcement of indigenous knowledge systems and their informal learning network will act as a catalyst for true empowerment;

- An emphasis on the learning processes in all identified learning spaces including school, rather than on content

will enable communities to be life-long learners;

- Lastly, stimulate schools to react and enter into the learning web.

This action-research will be conducted in partnership with three local NGOs in three different geographical zones:

- In the Nashik district of Maharashtra with Abhivyakti Media for Development;

- In the Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh with Shram Niketan Sansthan;

- In the new state of Uttaranchal with the Society for Integrated Development of the Himalayas (SIDH).

This will enable the work to benefit from the experiences and approaches of three partner organisations, the diversity of contexts and of content of learning.

These projects will aim at recognising and validating the whole learning network, will encourage families to reflect on the culture of schooling and on integrating school into the daily learning environment of children and families. They will encourage the local learning processes practised in the various learning spaces: seeing, observing, doing, practising, looking for information, and making mistakes. They will strengthen certain processes like reflection, critical

analysis, creativity, intergenerational learning, sharing. They will use traditional as well as new learning spaces like those where children play or work, existing women's groups, existing farmers' groups, or media. They wish to regenerate indigenous knowledge systems. One such piece of action-research is described as an example below.

Kshano Kshani Shikshan: Action-research in Nashik, India

Action-research implemented by Abhivyakti Media and Development (AMD), Nashik District, Maharashtra and Aide et Action

AREA OF INTERVENTION: 8 villages in Nashik District, Maharashtra

MODE OF INTERVENTION: A 3-member AMD team and one Aide et Action facilitator in partnership with 4 grassroots organisations.

TOTAL NO. OF BENEFICIARY FAMILIES: 1980 families

FIELD ACTORS FOR ACTION-RESEARCH:

- Children up to the age of 15 years (schooling and non-schooling): 2250

- Youth (literate and non-literate): 1375

- Women (literate and non-literate): 5325

- Farmers (land owners and landless): 5260

OBJECTIVES:

1. To demonstrate the resources (informal, non-formal and formal learning resources) within a learning community to address Education for All: facilitate an existing learning web of which school is one element.

2. To demonstrate the necessity of a shift from schools and curricula to a learning environment and 'learning processes'.

II. THE PROJECT IS BASED ON THE FOLLOWING THREE PRINCIPLES :

2.1 Creation of a learning web for collective learning:

This Action-Research (AR) will focus on the creation of a learning web, including schools. The main emphasis is on 'meaningful learning', growing in self-esteem and empowerment in terms of responding constructively to changes. The AR groups belonging to all four categories of actors, form the 'learning web': *children, youth, women and farmers*. Although each group has its own learning issues and its own plan of action, the AR will create a dynamic interaction between the groups for new collective learning – for

example, cross learning between those attending school and those not doing so will generate an impact on teachers. What farmers learn will have an impact on all children working in the fields or in *panchayats*. A focus on reviving traditional knowledge systems will engender a dialogue between youth and the elderly.

2.2 No curriculum:

This project is not based on a pre-defined curriculum. It is based on existing (indigenous) and incoming (exogenous) values and knowledge in the villages. The indigenous knowledge relates to art, culture, traditions, health care and livelihood within families and communities. Communities are faced with exogenous knowledge coming via schools, media, market forces and government departments. This project aims at enhancing the '*learning processes*' in the framework of a '*learning content that already exists'*. It therefore emphasises reflection, critical thinking, intergenerational learning and creativity.

2.3 Learning for All:

This project addresses all children without distinction, those in schools and those out of schools, and all community members, literate and non-literate. The cross learning between those who attend school and

those who do not, supported by tools to encourage reflection, questioning, critical analysis and creativity, will promote more meaningful learning for all children.

III. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION – THREE MAIN FOCUS AREAS:

3.1 Capacity building of research team in Action-Research and learning processes

3.2 Action-Research in 8 villages with the help of village facilitators/volunteers:

The AR process is aimed at four groups of field actors: *children, youth, women and farmers*. This process essentially consists of interaction and dialogue with the target *groups in their own spaces* and on their *own learning issues*. The AR process within each group has a name and an identity and is based on a certain number of principles.

a. **Khelghar for children below 10 years**: Interaction with all children (those attending school and those not doing so) up to the age of 10 years. Based on principles of non-competition and co-operative learning, the children's own collective spaces will be harnessed for a self-directed learning. Special learning tools will be used to foster multiple

intelligences.[48] Facilitators/Volunteers will be chosen from the villages and trained for the purpose.

b. **Critical and Creative groups for children between 10 and 14 years**: Dialogue with children in their own collective spaces (work or play) in order to encourage critical thinking and creative expressions for self-directed learning on self-identified issues.

c. **Tarun Mandal for youth**: Interaction among existing youth groups in order to enhance a collective and peer learning process on issues of self-governance and youth identity. This interaction will promote intergenerational learning so as to build bridges between indigenous and modern knowledge systems. Trained village facilitators will be involved for the purpose.

d. **Women's learning spaces**: Existing women's groups, which are themselves important learning spaces, will be harnessed for reflection and critical thinking on their own health status. Each woman will be called to examine her own health status and her knowledge and usage of

indigenous health systems. This will lead to an appreciation of local health knowledge systems and their enhancement.

e. **Krishak Mitra/Panchayat**: Animation of farmers' groups (men and women) for reflection and critical thinking on existing agricultural concerns: indigenous seeds, natural resource management, water management. Documentation of traditional resources.

3.3 Structured 'learning events', catalysts of the AR process:

Each group of actors has an annual learning event which is meant for all members of that group in the 8-village zone. They will get together and share their experiences as learning communities. These events are meant to foster *exchange of experiences, collective learning and interdependence*.

a. **Gammat Jatra for children up to 14 years**: One festival in Sinnar with 'Learning activities' to facilitate *cross-learning* between children of different communities and the different AR groups.

b. **Youth festival**: One festival in Trimbakeshwar for *cross learning* between youth groups on issues of governance and youth identity. Identified and revived local knowledge systems to be

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[48] According to the theory presented by Gardner 1999.

projected. 'Learning activities' around the above issues to characterise the festival.

c. **Arogya Melawa and Stree Mela**: One festival for women in Girnare on 'identified health concerns of women'. These too have the aim of promoting *cross-learning* and experience sharing between women of the 8 villages.

d. **Krishak Jagat for farmers**: An annual gathering at Sangamner, of the Krishak Panchayats for *cross-sharing of experiences* and of identified learning issues.

EXPECTED OUTCOME:

In principle, action-research cannot have pre-defined results. However the project expects as an outcome a true 'empowerment' of communities via,

1. A better understanding, on the part of the field actors, of their environment and the changes taking place in it

2. A strengthening of indigenous knowledge systems

3. A change in 'learning processes' in schools and in all other learning spaces in the community.

Project brief
"Liberate School"
Kshano Kshani Shikshan

OBJECTIVES:

1. To demonstrate the resources within a learning community to address Education for All: supporting an existing learning network, school being one element of it.

2. To demonstrate the necessity of a shift from schools and curricula to a learning environment and 'learning processes'.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION: Abhivyakti Media and Development, India and Aide et Action.

SUPPORTED BY: Aide et Action.

INTERVENTION ZONE: 8 villages in the Nashik District of Maharashtra in India.

INTERVENTION TYPE: Participatory Conceptualisation with a team of three researchers from AMD, one researcher from Aide et Action and 4 grass root organisations.

FIELD ACTORS CONCERNED:

- All children up to the age of 15 (those attending school and those not doing so) = 2250

- Youth (literate and non-literate) = 1375

- Women (literate and non-literate) = 5325

- Farmers (men and women) = 5260

What does Kshano Kshani Shikshan mean?

It means 'learning at every moment'. The project seeks to support a 'learning web' composed of school and of all other 'learning spaces' like the family, community, market place, livelihood, nature…

What is the curriculum or 'learning content' this project proposes?

None. The action-research is simply aiming at reinforcing the *learning processes* like critical analysis, reflection, intergenerational learning and creativity, within a framework of existing knowledge which is composed, on the one hand of traditional and indigenous knowledge and on the other hand of knowledge coming into the villages via schools, media, market forces and other external agents.

What is the role of AMD?

1. Capacity building of staff and facilitators from grassroots organisations on Action-Research and learning.

2. Facilitation of Action-Research among 4 groups of field actors (children, youth, women and farmers)

3. Organisation of an annual event for each group of actors as a catalyst for the action-research process.

What is the cost and duration of the project?

Aide et Action is supporting a first phase of the action-research planned for a period of 3 years. The cost of the project for this 3 year phase is Rs. 6338100 (approximately 150000 euros) which is essentially composed of animation and the production of a few 'learning tools'.

Issues for further study

This Action-Research will promote a 'Learning Village' where communities, depending on their self-determined 'learning agenda', will undertake processes which result in meaningful collective learning. Over and above very careful documentation of this Action-Research process itself – a kind of narration of the evolution of such a community, guided by a process of self-organisation – this project is an opportunity to conduct research on a

number of other issues that have traditionally been linked to schooling and its empowerment capacities. For example,

*   What is the impact of a learning community on a local economy, infant mortality, health awareness, family size, environmental awareness and so on. What are the current indicators of economy (community resources, indebtedness, employment), environment, schooling, health, local governance and decision-making processes, social and community relationships (inter-caste and intergenerational relationships in particular)?

*   Within the caste system, communities have had a certain relationship with knowledge and knowledge systems. This relationship was considered irrational and unfair and therefore called for modification. The main instrument used for this purpose was the schooling system. How has school modified this relationship? What is the impact of a learning community on the same?

*   What is the impact of a 'learning community' on schools? All efforts to reform or transform schools have had very little impact. Will a 'learning community' create any changes in the learning processes in schools? Does it help transform the teachers' role into the much wanted role of a 'learning

facilitator? Does it encourage out-of-school children to enrol in school? What are the differences or similarities in the learning agendas of different communities? How do the parents' expectations change?

- Schooling is claimed to empower communities by enabling them to relate to or even find a place in the pre-defined models of society. What is the reaction of a 'learning community' to these models? Does it have a choice? How does it exercise these choices? How does it participate and react to changes in its environment? What are the systems organised to support their choices and their own worldview?

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