Impoverished Indian Communities Fight For Education

By Womens Feature Service

Orai, the nondescript headquarters of the Jalaun district in Uttar Pradesh (UP), has an amazing story to tell the world. Lying in the neglected Bundelkhand region, Orai, which has a large Dalit ('downtrodden') population, experiences acute water scarcity, low literacy levels and high unemployment levels.

Spearheading this unique social inclusion movement is Kuldeep Kumar, 21, a Dalit student. The son of a mason, who is preparing for his Bachelor of Education degree, Kuldeep decided to do his bit. For two years now, he has been taking the message of universal education to the people through his organization, the Prayaas Jan Utam Samiti.

Kuldeep was 18 when he participated in an international research project and observed the plight of the local people. The experience stayed with him. Today, sitting in a two-room rented apartment in Jalaun, which functions as an office-cum-hostel for the girls in the group, he observes, "The root cause of poverty is illiteracy and unemployment. The best way to empower the poorest is to give them access to education."

Popularising the idea of education was, however, a huge task, and Kuldeep realised it could not be done alone. That is when he set up Prayaas Jan Utam Samiti with a core team of nine youngsters, including three girls. Most of the volunteers are less than 30 years old, come from very poor Dalit households and have experienced discrimination at first-hand.

Support for Prayaas first came in the form of Baldan Singh and his wife Alka, who work on issues of anti-Dalit violence in Orai. Soon other groups, such as the Aasha Mahila Adhikar Manch and Dr B.R. Ambedkar Yuva Samaj Sudhar Samiti, came forward. Together they formed the Bundelkhand Dalit Manch (BDM), an umbrella body of Dalit NGOs which had the twin agendas of education and employment. Presently, there are nearly 35 organisations that work as part of BDM.

Convinced that lasting social awareness can stem only from "informed" communities, this larger team began chalking out ways by which Dalit children could be brought into the educational mainstream.

Supported by National Confederation of Dalit Organizations (NACDON), they soon came up with the idea of Right to Education rallies. India, incidentally, has committed itself to ensuring that all children, boys and girls, get primary schooling by year 2015 under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). If this has to happen, it is definitely in places like Orai that children should be in schools.

Organizing these meets proved far tougher than anticipated. "The area of our work was the tribal belt, where ignorance, disparity and discrimination were huge," says Kuldeep. But the youngsters were optimistic. A team of 21, including five girls, representing three regions of Jhansi, Jalaun and Lalitpur in Bundelkhand, was trained for three days before they embarked on a month long journey to spread literacy awareness here. NACDON volunteers from Delhi provided the training. The first rally was at Hya village in Jhansi.

While Kuldeep personally visited 20 villages, his team ended up covering a whopping 103 villages! Instead of one, they visited three villages in a day with their message: Every child had a right to education. The team members found that many children had been denied school admission outright. Others were admitted but were not attending classes largely because of the caste discrimination they encountered, both from teachers and upper-caste students. Cattle grazed in the premises of many schools, and the dispensing of mid-day meal was irregular.

"First we had to tell people that education was their children's right and that they cannot be denied it because of their caste or religion. We had to build up confidence in both parents and children," reveals Baldan Singh.

The children who were refused admission were handed Right to Education cards. They were told to show these cards to any school authority that denied them admission. Taking caste prejudices head on worked. Recalcitrant school officials found themselves cornered. In one instance, children demonstrated outside the home of an absentee teacher, holding placards that read, "Teacher, aao aur padho" ("Teacher, come and teach."). When storerooms for the mid-day meal provisions were found

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locked, Prayaas members had them opened and ensured that meal schedules were followed. They left
behind their mobile numbers so that they could be contacted if there were such disruptions again.

In most places, the team also noticed that parents and teachers blamed each other. While the parents
argued that teachers were absenting themselves, the teachers accused the parents of not sending their
wards to school. To solve this problem, triangular Parent-Teacher-Student associations were formed,
where everybody could together sort out their differences.

The team also wrote simple slogans on village walls: ‘Ghar ghar vidya deep jala’ (light the lamp of
education in each home’); ‘Bachcha bachee sabhi padhao’ (‘teach both son and daughter’); Padhee
likhee ladki roshni ghar ki (‘an educated girl is the light of a home’) were just some of the inspiring
messages.

Information on education is combined with entertainment. Skits, highlighting the importance of
schooling, were enacted for local communities. Public discussions on school education were
conducted, so that views could be freely expressed or countered. This was followed by a two-month-
long Dalit Shiksha Jagruti Abhiyan (Dalit Education Awareness Campaign).

The female members of the team were entrusted with a special task of acting as motivators for girls’
education. Explains Shilima Gautam, 23, a Prayaas member, who is preparing for her Bachelor of
Education exam, “Take the Pattipura village in Jalaun. It has a 100 percent Dalit population and none
of the girls went to school. So we spent a lot of time here stressing on the importance of educating
daughters.” Shilima, who has three sisters, works as a ‘kisaan mita’ (friend of farmer - a semi
government post - who provides local farmers with information about good farming practices) and
earns Rs 1,000 (US$1=Rs 44.6) per month. With this she supports herself and her college-going sister,
Neelima, who dreams of becoming a police officer. The sisters - trained as motivators - live
independently in Jalaun in a rented room about 55 kilometers away from their village, Gohan. They are
fortunate to have an enlightened father. Says Shilima, “My father, a watch repairer, supports girls’
education. He believes that no development - whether individual or national - is possible without
education.”

Interestingly, not only has Kuldeep helped to motivate teachers, parents and students, he has inspired
many youngsters like him. Sometimes Kuldeep is a bit embarrassed by the attention. But he is clear
that school education is the first step to addressing growing social disparities and poverty. “I ask
everyone just one question: How many officers put their children into government schools? I tell them
that in this question is hidden the answer to improving government schooling and ensuring the Right to
Education of every child,” he says. It is precisely such awareness raising that will help in the
implementation of the newly passed Right to Education Act, in both letter and spirit.

Young Kuldeep is confident that Orai is slowly moving towards achieving Millennium Development Goal
Two: Universal primary education. Because it is only when the poorest, most socially disempowered
communities access schooling can there be a last change. By flashing their Right To Education
cards and demanding that the lamp of education be lit in every home, Orai’s children are signaling
change in a forgotten region of the country.

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31-05-2010