

Rajasthan school that gives women a voice

On the edge of the Sariska Tiger Reserve, 14 children cram chemical formulae under a tree in the compound of a village school. Seven of them are girls.

Around 40 km from district headquarters Alwar, the community-based experiment to educate poor girl children in this remote village of the Thana Gazi block in Rajasthan is unique in many ways.

'The school, Bodhshala or the Samudayik Bodh Uccha Prathamik Vidyalaya, was set up by the local villagers 10 years ago. They donated Rs.75,000 from their paltry earnings to build the school so that they did not have to send their girls away from home to study. It has lent meaning to their lives,' Rampal, who teaches students of Class 7, the senior-most class in the school, told IANS.

The school will add Class 8 in 2010, 'so that by the time, the current class is eligible for the final board examination, the school will have Class 10,' Rampal said.

There are 221 students and 10 teachers, including women, some of whom have studied in the school. According to Rampal: 'The girls fare better than the boys and even move on to college in the neighbouring town of Narayanpur.'

The villagers meet informally every day to take stock of the study modules and the progress of the students. It follows the guidelines of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and has a small library and a boarding.

'We also meet the teachers formally once a month to assess the performance of the students. The women in the community of 100-odd villagers who send their children to school take an active part in the education assessment programme of their daughters.

'Some of them also trained to teach the kindergarten students. They are called mother-teachers,' said one of the school's founders, Basanti Lal, a vegetable vendor.

Chameli, an illiterate homemaker who has been associated with the school's growth for the last nine years, said: 'All my granddaughters have studied in the Bodh school.'

'The school has given the women in the village a voice. We attend the school meetings and are involved about our children, especially our daughters' education. We want the school to become an instrument of change in our lives.'

'The school is a learning ground for us too,' said Kiran, a shy homemaker, whose daughter Sapna is a student.

'It teaches us to read, write, how to avail ourselves of bank loans and deal with lawyers in ancestral property disputes when women are deprived of their share,' Kiran said.

The school also offers tips to villagers about 'animal husbandry, modern farming and alternative livelihoods' as Salanchal switches from traditional rain-fed agriculture to 'petty businesses, daily wage jobs and self-employment'.

Salanchal, which has been ravaged by drought for the last two years leading to successive crop failures, fights to keep the school afloat.

'The men who once tilled their land have now become daily wage earners. But each family sets aside Rs.500 to Rs.1,000 every month aside for the school and their children's education,' said Banwari Lal, a daily wage earner, two of whose daughters, Puja and Ambha, studied in the school.

The school's beginning is rooted in the region's changing socio-economic dynamics.

'Ten years ago in 1999, Basanti Lal, a vegetable vendor from the village, met a local NGO worker and expressed the need to educate nearly 25 girls in the area after the crop yield started dwindling because of scanty rainfall and the family incomes started shrinking.

'He felt that the women had to be educated to fend for themselves and to take care of legal and bureaucratic matters in the absence of men, who began to look for alternative avenues of sustenance. We wanted our girls to work. The community also required a platform to interact. The families pooled in money and international NGO Oxfam flagged off the dream with a bit of financial aid and expertise,' Banwari Lal recalled.

The Salanchal education project was estimated to cost Rs.100,000. The NGO paid Rs.24,000 and the rest was paid by the villagers.

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