



Learning While Helping

**Suresh Kumar Sahu,
Rakesh Teta and Gulshan Yadav**



Dhamtari district, with its diverse geographical and social features, lies in the central part of the state of Chhattisgarh. A significant - and fertile - part of the district falls in the Mahanadi basin. Paddy cultivation under irrigated farming system is one of the important contributors to the livelihoods of the people in this area. A distinct area in the south of the district has an undulating terrain with thick forest. Collection of minor forest produce adds to the livelihoods of people in this area where mostly subsistence agriculture is practiced because of the lack of irrigation. Another area within the district is where four of the medium and large dams of central Chhattisgarh are situated. A large number of villages, many of them still not rehabilitated, were displaced due to construction of these dams. Fishing has become an important activity for many people in the villages falling under the catchment areas of these dams.

The above mentioned three distinct agro-ecological features influence the diverse livelihood patterns of people in these areas. Urbanization has been another factor influencing livelihood patterns of people, particularly in the adjoining areas of the upcoming small urban centres in the district. The demographic profile in the above mentioned three areas also has a pattern. While the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) form the largest group in the agriculture based area of Mahanadi basin, tribal population is greater in the other two areas of forest and dams.

A study is being conducted to map diverse livelihood patterns and understand the factors influencing the livelihoods of the people in these areas of the districts. Few sample villages have been selected to collect information from the selected sample of Households. The study has taken a mixed method approach using a number of tools for data collection such as household survey, focus group discussions, interviews and participatory wellbeing categorization.

We thought of including children in the process of data collection. In doing this, the following three types of tools were decided to be used in the data collection by children:

- The daily schedule: to understand gender-based differentiation in the work for both adults and children. Ten children (five boys and five girls) from each village took up this task.
- Village profiling: a format was prepared to capture data on demographic, social, economic, geographical and infrastructural information of the villages. One or two groups of four to six children from each village were chosen to undertake this task.
- Seasonal calendars: to collect data on agricultural practices and crop cycles, seasonal health issues, availability of Minor Forest Produce (MFP), local festivals and melas, and vegetables and fruits available in different months of a year. This task also was taken up by one or two groups of children from each village.

About 300 children of class eight from thirty two villages took part in this process. Our experiences, beginning with the enthusiasm shown by the children right up to the quality of the data collected, have been really encouraging, though we were not very confident in the beginning as we were not sure of both children's participation and quality of data. The issues related to research ethics was another problem we were grappling with. Finally, based on our understanding of the lack of space for children to connect to their own environment within the framework of school; we decided to go ahead despite our fears. This disconnect has long been identified by many and has also been diagnosed as one of the reasons for students' disinterest in the processes in the school.

The NCF 2005 underlines these problems as 'inflexibility' of the school system, where 'learning

has become isolated activity' lacking space for 'children to link knowledge with their lives'. The processes in the schools 'bypass vital dimensions of the human capacity to create new knowledge' and 'promote a regime that discourages creative thinking and insights'. The child's context has been excluded and 'learning has become a source of burden and stress on students and their parents'.

The NCF 2005 has also tried to address such issues in different sections of the document. The National Focus Group (NFG) on Social Sciences, for example, stresses the importance of inclusion of local, social and ecological contexts children live in. Similarly, the Position paper on Work and Education suggests introduction of a universal programme of 'work-centered education' based on the principle of viewing productive work along with all other forms of work (for example, activities, experiments, surveys, field-based study, social action, engagement with the community etc.) in the core curriculum as a pedagogic medium'.

The tasks we set were thought of as an opportunity for children to connect to their own environment. The students in the processes were identifying varied sources of information, collecting data (sometime two data contesting each other), verifying and triangulating them, going on to sorting and classifying the data. Knowledge construction about various things directly related to them from their immediate environment can be inferred to be happening. However, there are were many other important processes that were happening in the course of tasks children were involved in. Few of such things are discussed here based on reflections from children.

Working in groups was one of the thing that children enjoyed the most in this task. Children divided the tasks within the group. Few took up the task of talking to village elders, others were assigned to talk to patwari or nurse or panchayat secretary. The advantages and challenges related to working in groups on such projects, children reflected provided them with learnings on this important area. A few of them said that they were not able to complete their tasks and were then helped by others. A few times the group showed its displeasure over member's lack of interest.

Explaining their work to the villagers and the village functionaries also provided them opportunities to

try out their communication skills, though students felt the responses (villagers and functionaries) were mixed. Some were very welcoming and appreciated their efforts. However, many also discouraged them and told this was are not their work and they should focus on their studies in the school. Clearly, the notion of learning within the boundaries of the school was very strong among such community members, though it was interesting that most teachers during our initial interactions welcomed the idea and few even helped the students in their work.

Many teachers used the analogy of projects work that children in some urban schools do to explain the tasks that the children in these schools were doing and they valued it in those terms. As a result, teachers from schools where we did not reach approached us to take up such tasks in their schools as well, showing that they are aware of the idea of broadening the learning space to include the local contexts. However, they also were bound by the conventional notion of classroom. Another issue that children faced during their tasks was of gender differentiation. The mixed group of boys and girls in few villages were accosted by the elders, who wanted to know why they were hanging out together.

In response to the question whether this experiment helped them learn anything new or in a better way, children overwhelmingly responded in the affirmative. They found that there were many things that we observed everyday but remained ignorant and didn't know enough about. In response to the question on the work of the village people, the usual response was 'farming'. However, when they started listing out peoples' occupations and the work people do, they ended up with many more categories. Thus, the format provided them opportunity to observe things in a more organized way and that helped them learn many new things.

The daily schedule also helped the children understand the differences in workload and types of work based on gender. We had the opportunity to discuss these aspects with students in a few schools. From the 'daily schedule' data the children had collected the children almost unanimously concluded that women/girls do more work within their own families. On the question whether it is fair to have such gender differentiation in work, also almost all of them thought it to be unjust. We found

this could be an excellent pedagogical tool to discuss the issue of gender with students in these schools.

Analyzing the data collected by the children indicates an interesting thing. While the quality of data was, in general, quite good, most of the gaps were to be found in the data accessed from government departments, such as land use pattern in the village to be collected from the patwari. The notion of official secrecy with the government system seems to be at play even at the village level.

Thus, clearly the participant children enjoyed the process and also had an opportunity to learn few

things about working in groups, sources of information, their immediate society and environment. In addition, they used their communication and negotiation skills in the process. One of the children explained to us that he felt good being able to help a researcher, someone who he considered was doing some 'serious' or 'important' work. Just being able to achieve this feeling of agency among the children made the whole exercise worth the effort, irrespective of any other outcomes achieved.

Suresh is working with DI, Dhamtari and is also part of Livelihood Initiative at Azim Premji University. He currently is engaged in livelihood mapping research and understanding the livelihood choices of rural people in Dhamtari district. He earlier has worked in development sector mostly on the issues of agro-biodiversity, food security, Indigenous traditional knowledge and decentralized natural resource management. He may be contacted at suresh.sahu@azimpremjifoundation.org

Rakesh is working with DI, Dhamtari and is currently part of Social Science team. He has also been involved in working on the idea of work and education with few selected schools in the district. He earlier has worked in development sector in tribal regions of Chhattisgarh. His area of interests include understanding diverse social contexts and cultural practices. He may be contacted at rakesh.teta@azimpremjifoundation.org

Gulshan is working with DI, Dhamtari as Fellow since 2013. He has a Master's degree in Business Administration with a specialization in Marketing and Human Resources and an M. Phil in Management. He earlier has worked in the area of Computer Education. He may be contacted at gulshan.yadav@azimpremjifoundation.org