



# Nurturing the citizenry of the future: community involvement in schools

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The National Curriculum Framework 2005 has stated that “fertile and robust education is always created, rooted in the physical and cultural soil of the child, and nourished through interaction with parents, teachers, fellow students and the community.” However, there can be various forms of community involvement in schools. Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education, 2009 (RTE Act) is a legislation which seeks to provide quality education for all children in the age group of 6-14 years. In this Act itself, specific provisions have been made for democratisation of schools and for parents and local communities to play their due roles in shaping and running of the schools in the form of School Management Committees (SMC) and preparation of School Development Plan. Although a good move, such involvements can be viewed as technical interventions and the goal is to see that the school runs effectively. However, our children are today's (and tomorrow's) citizens too. The relationship between the community and the school must be organic and something linked to the future of the child and the community. There are few instances in our country where successful school-community links have been possible –and they also contributed some meaning to the education. We are going to discuss three of them: the Vigyan Ashram IBT model, Sikshan-Mitra program in Ashram schools, both in Maharashtra; and Swanirvar experiment in West Bengal.

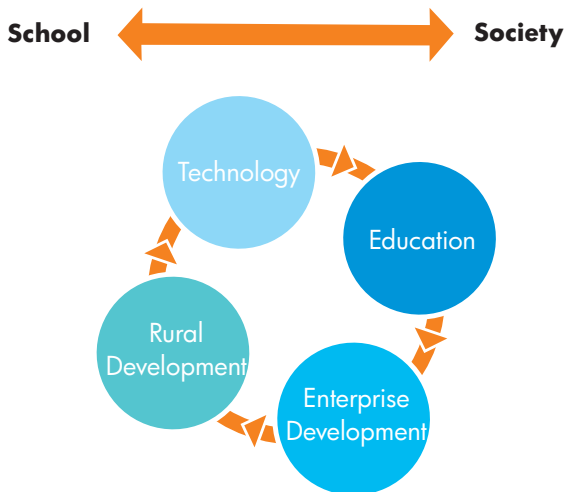
## **Vigyan Ashram model in Class VIII- X of government schools in Maharashtra**

Vigyan Ashram was set up in Paval, Maharashtra by Dr. S Kalbag in the year 1983. Dr. Kalbag observed that all sections of society do not receive knowledge uniformly in our knowledge distribution or education system – thus leading to poor people remaining severely handicapped with regard to some basic intellectual skills. This makes them unable to use the knowledge around them. He was more concerned with the propagation of scientific and technological knowledge for “real needs of rural masses” and felt that education system is the only effective system to achieve delivery of technology. Thus came Vigyan Ashram which is working towards the stated aim of “Rural development through education system”.

Apart from an in-house, informal program, Dr. Kalbag designed a course for school students – Introduction to Basic Technology (IBT). The IBT is for students of class 8-10 and is currently running in 122 public schools in four states (Maharashtra, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, and Goa). Maharashtra government has given recognition to IBT as a subject in class 10 board exam.

The IBT is quite an innovative course and the whole syllabus has four sub-disciplines: Agriculture/Animal Husbandry; Home/Health; Engineering/Material ;and Energy/environment. But our current discussion will focus more on the principles of the design of IBT and how it was created to achieve an organic school – community linkage.

The basic model is based on the following two premises –



### There are four principles of the whole Vigyan Ashram education model:

#### Learning while doing

One cannot learn in the classroom until one has learnt the prerequisite “concepts” by experience in the real life. It has implication for education in general and for science education in particular.

#### Multi skill training

Skills are means to concretise one’s ideas and inventions. Skills training is not intended to make the student master craftsmen (in fact VA doesn’t regard itself as a vocational educational programme) but to facilitate “technological literacy”

#### Two-way link between school and community

The school should provide various kinds of services to the community (paid services) and while doing so the students can learn (in a real life situation) the practical and economical skills attached to their knowledge. The community becomes a stakeholder in the functioning of the school and thereby makes it financially stable.

#### Instructor as an entrepreneur

VA appoints a trained ‘drop-out’ as an instructor in the school. He operates his

business with the school facilities and gives hands-on training to the students. He earns the surplus from the operation, community gets the service at modest cost, and students get a good education.

When we think about community involvement in schools, the last two factors are quite important. There is a clear recognition that schools and students are not working in isolation; but they are part of a community where they reside. It has two implications: a) implications for the future of a child when she will finish her schooling and go back to her family and community, b) implications for the community itself as most of the schools in Maharashtra where IBT courses are running are in quite remote areas and the schools actually provide many services to the villagers! in this process, the school earns some money which goes in the running of the IBT course, the students learn in a real life problem solving mode, and the residents from surrounding areas are benefit as well. As we have already mentioned, IBT is purely a science and technology based course and the general idea behind the initiative is to equip rural people with capacities, which will help them in exploiting the gains from the new technological developments. It is seen that many new technologies are introduced in the villages through these schools (which would not have been perhaps possible otherwise). Some of these technologies and services have direct linkage with the livelihood and productivity of villagers – these are:

#### Agri-Animal Husbandry

Drip irrigation, sprinkler, seeding, azolla culture, pest control, soil testing etc.

#### Energy/Environment

Solar cooker, LED lighting, bio-gas, Soakpit, watershed etc.

#### Food processing

Solar drying, water testing etc.

#### Engineering

Ferro cement, bamboo treatment, low cost housing, toilets, pedal power etc.

The instructor should be an entrepreneur from the community! The IBT has four sub-disciplines and each one needs an expert instructor to teach the modules to the students of class 8 to 10. For example: the school will need an expert farmer, an expert welder, an expert lab person and someone having adequate skills on electricity and energy. Engaging four already existing entrepreneurs from the community serves two definite purposes: the community feels that they have a part in the school, and, secondly, these individuals become a role model for the students to stay in their villages and find or create meaningful livelihood options.

### **The Shikshan Mitra Programme ( SMP) in Ashram Schools of Maharashtra**

The SMP was an intervention done by BAIF (Bharat Agro Industries Foundation) in certain Ashram schools of Maharashtra. Ashram schools are residential schools for tribal students and are conceptualised in a different manner than regular general schools. The concept of Ashram schools had been derived from the Gandhian philosophy of basic education in which the teachers and the students live together and the students are helped to develop their complete personality and to sharpen of their abilities. Various policy guidelines emphasised that:

- These schools would be set up in the most backward tribal areas;
- They should be inter-village schools;
- They should be opened in such areas where normal schools cannot be opened.

In Maharashtra alone, a total of about four lakh tribal students are enrolled in 1103 ashram schools (556 – Private Aided and 576 – Govt).

After years of working in rural-tribal belts of Nandurbar region, BAIF could observe that most of the tribal students return to their conventional agro-based lifestyle after completing or dropping out of school education. The concern now was whether their long years in schools equip them with necessary life skills required for their future or alienate them from actual life processes! The Shikshan Mitra programme was designed to

impart values as well as practical knowledge and life skills relevant to the communities of these Ashram shala students. It was strongly felt that reciprocal relationship with the community has to be an integral part of the education system. The schools which are centres of knowledge should educate the community with the help of students by direct interaction with the community. The community in turn should contribute to the development of the school in terms of physical labour, material and by sharing their knowledge and skills in real life situations.

It is interesting to note that the BAIF intervention started with the idea that schools will work as 'development centers' for the community. BAIF was already working with various livelihood generation/enhancement activities for the tribal communities. Mostly these projects are on integrated farming, System of Rice Intensification, milk cooperative, organic traditional farming, horticulture, floriculture, cashew cultivation and so on etc. In 2003, they decided to use the Ashram schools as demonstration centers for their activities as on an average 400 children from various villages stay in one school and during their vacations they go back to their families. BAIF thought that these students can spread more awareness in their respective places about small scale rural technologies. Eight schools from Nandurbar were selected; BAIF people as well as expert farmers from the communities came there as demonstrators. In 2009, the whole intervention was launched in a more formal way in 48 Ashram schools in Nandurbar district.

The specific aim of SMP was to equip tribal students with life skills and information. These skills and information are of multiple dimensions:

- Skills and information regarding agriculture and agro- technology, imparting health education and also helping the students to assimilate essential health habits;
- Familiarising students with important local civil institutions along with essential government documents and policies to increase their social awareness;

- Creating awareness about the biodiversity in their surroundings;
- Creating opportunities for developing important life skills such as communication skills, skills of decision making, problem solving, team work, planning management etc.
- Create an atmosphere conducive for boosting the confidence of the tribal students and building positive self-image.

The complementarity between the Ashram schools and the community was tried by:

- Transmitting the latest and advanced information in agriculture, health and social topics to the surrounding tribal hamlets through the tribal students;
- Establishing links with skilled and knowledgeable villagers by inviting them to the school as resource persons. Apart from that, the parents and villagers were also asked to contribute towards the school activities by donating material (for example wood for fence) or labour;
- Participating in each other's programmes – village community can attend the functions and programmes at the school and vice versa.

“Vacation projects” was an important element of the whole school – community linkage idea of Shikshan Mitra Programme. This was created as a tool for generation and transmission of knowledge to the community by students. The later conducted vacation projects at home during Diwali and summer vacations. There were four major types of projects:

- Collection projects: seed collection or collection of traditional songs;
- Demonstration projects: demonstration related to health ( e.g. preparing ORS solution or water purification) or agriculture (e.g. vermi compost);
- Survey projects: students were expected to study socially important issues at the village level, critically analyse, draw inferences and share it with the community. Some examples

are – survey of village water resources, survey of drop-out students in the village, survey of availability of birth and caste certificates and ration cards etc.

- Field visits: mostly these were exposure visits to BAIF community development activities such as new experiments in agriculture, processing units, water and soil conservation sites, cooperatives and so on.

The SMP interventions were actively implemented for four years i.e. from June 2009 to March 2013. The “Action for Agricultural Renewal in Maharashtra, Pune” conducted an impact assessment of the project and came up with a report in April, 2013. The report observed that all the stakeholders of the project such as students, teachers and communities are benefitting directly by receiving information about improved agriculture, life skills, its application in the farms, growing crops by using organic manure etc. This has also led to renewal of students' interest in agriculture, and has given direction and confidence that agriculture may yet be one of the sustainable sources of livelihood. Skills gained by students regarding floriculture, kitchen gardening, vermo-composting, horticulture, plantation and nursery techniques etc. are transmitted to their parents and whole family. These are crucial issues as any community will benefit and flourish from more and more educated youths staying back and introducing better and productive livelihood enhancement measures.

The impact assessment could point out another important area: the involvement of girls in school. The report found that girls of the community have started mingling with the boys and have started participating as equals in all life skill activities. They are intend to work and do not want to get married at an early age. They are confident in talking to strangers on issues related to their health and sanitation. One can argue that these schools are effectively contributing to the enrichment of their communities as it is known that educated and empowered girls can change a whole community although these contributions might not be direct and visible at times.

## Swanirvar experiment in West Bengal

In the 1990s the question which the NGO Swanirvar working in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal asked was – Can even poor illiterate communities participate in “knowledge generation and transmission”? Or is school education only about teachers pushing “knowledge” from text books down their children’s throats? And the only “participation” that communities may do in school education is to contribute labour, and materials, and money if possible, and listen to moralistic lectures on health and hygiene from teachers? Those days there were separate History and Geography and Science text books from Class three onwards. This was before the days of EVS. Seventeen chapters of History from Classes three to five “explained” the whole of human history. Geography was a mass of information about each district of West Bengal and each state of India along with maps to be memorised. What could poor illiterate parents do except be overawed by all this?

Swanirvar decided to reverse this hegemony and bring in the community as real participants. Children in Classes three and four were asked to first create their own personal history or timeline. Some they remembered. But rest they had to find out. But from whom? Who would know about their early childhood? Would the text books have their history? Would the teachers know? It was the illiterate parents who had to tell their children incidents about their early life. Next was writing the family history as far as they knew going back three, four, five generations. The names, the occupations, the changes over years, any migrations. Then there was investigating the history of the oldest article in the house. And the “knowledge” of the poor illiterate parents came gushing out and the children wrote it. And this knowledge of the community came into the classroom and became something to discuss, to ponder over, to see any patterns if possible. When children were asked to find out how the village got its name ---the whole community got involved. There were several versions and the

community excitedly debated and argued. And the children wrote the different versions.

How could one find out?

What is evidence?

What are the soil types in the village?

What crops grow where and why?

What are the requirements of each crop?

What are the various village crafts and other occupations?

Who can tell all this?

The village farmer, the village craftsman?

Can they be brought into classroom or the children be taken to them?

Can children first discuss amongst themselves and make a questionnaire?

Can we together make a village map?

Geography now involved the whole community and was not some boring stuff to be memorised. This, Swanirvar felt, was taking school – community linkage to another dimension where school level teaching – learning was taking place all over the community and involved everyone. NCF 2005, of course, rightfully emphasises this as a legitimate way of going about the business of education which is imparting knowledge, skills and values to everyone involved.

## Conclusion

There is much work to be done. The three efforts described above are like a drop in the ocean. In more than 99% schools of India, school education is still about a teacher lording it over the students and community through the instrument of the text book. The authors are not sure what kind of capacity or environment building will lead to a fundamental attitudinal change in the majority of teachers. In the current atmosphere, if NCF 2005 is given to teachers, it will also be used as a text to be memorised rather than practiced. When a Class IX girl was taunted by the panchayat member whether Swanirvar was going to pay her for doing surveys, she challenged the panchayat member about testing

the precision of his knowledge about village problems with hers, and told the member in no uncertain terms that in the future she will become a much better panchayat member than him!

When will we have an organic school-community system that will give this courage, knowledge, skills and values to most students ?

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