



Lessons From The land

The Shram Niketan non-formal education model in Madhya Pradesh's Shahdol district simultaneously engenders cultural relevance and market orientation in 15 tribal-student communities.

Jeeeps to Jamadi village from Anuppur railway station take half an hour. The Mahindra commander jeeps take 15 passengers: four in the front seat, five in the rear and three each on either side of the parallel seats in the luggage compartment. Sitting in the back, breathing in the diesel fumes, you miss out on the beautiful countryside: waiting expectantly for the 30-minute ride to end, through snatches of conversation filtering as you pass through.

Jamadi on the Anuppur-Amarkantak road in Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh is itself a medium-sized village, with perhaps 200 houses or so. Its claim to fame is the Shram Niketan where Shyam Bahadur Namra, a stalwart supporter of Jaya Prakash Narayan, led the 'Sampooran Kranti' movement and also where Namra's wife Anuradha, started a unique educational experiment in 1977. Without any institutional support he developed a process which links organic farming with non-formal education (NFE). The curricula was designed around seasonal agricultural activities, including production, planning and marketing.

Says Namra, "India's educational system is inseparably linked with social and political systems. It has failed to benefit the Adivasis and Dalits, who have been further pauperised in the post-1947 period. Two interlinked elements are poverty and illiteracy. Education would not reach the poor unless the conditions of poverty are removed first." He further adds, "when we felt that the educational institutions in our society have failed to resolve the dichotomy between the needs of its oppressed class and their desire to acquire knowledge, we worked out a programme which was a radical shift from the formal education." Shram Niketan's NFE model is flexible and instruction is mixed with production, planning and educational games. These are no set books or other teaching material. Improvisation and creativity are hallmarks of the programme.

Says Anuradha, 'The lessons imparted are techniques of agricultural production, scientific knowledge of biological processes in nature, wage calculation, weight and volume measurement and a minimum ability to read and write. More knowledgeable student activists guide new learners in farming, helping them to acquire skill and knowledge. Informal discussions on health and hygiene are conducted and importance of preventive healthcare over curative measures are stressed. Benefits of fruits and herbs are explained in treating minor ailments. At recess, reading, writing and calculations are done. The curriculum changes as the learning of the participant progresses.'

Learners in the five-acre farm are between 11 and 16 years old. Namra and Anuradha form the core and at a time 20 learners are drawn from the Kol, Gond, Baiga, Bhuinya and migrant Oraon tribes. Moving away from any instruction of the formal system, the experiment has been empirically constructed' within the framework of man-nature and man-man conflicts' in the region. Learning includes activities and tours to the actual sites of agricultural production and marketing.

The learning goals of Shram Niketan have as their aim, to provide wider understanding of local conditions in a holistic perspective to the children from marginal, small and medium-sized farming communities. The children from landless labourers are directed towards understanding wage and quality calculations and price mechanisms in the market. The

educational thrust is towards application of scientific techniques for increased production. It is also kept in mind for both these groups, that the essential requirement is to give them a more expanded world-view, built upon a materialistic explanation of phenomena.

To assess the programme's successes one attempts to access to the original group of learners. But this was not easy. However, it is possible to talk to villagers in Taradand, Dulhari and Jamadi.

When probed about Shram Niketan, Manik Oraon of Taradand says, "When our tribe, the Oraons, came to Shahdol, we were regarded as expert land-levellers, a skill which local adivasis do not possess. Oraons can move mountains of earth to develop agricultural land or reshape territory for mining and industrial operations. We settled near Jamadi and the first batch from our tribe cleared Namra's land and made it arable. Oraon learners stayed in the farm and learned organic farming. In the evenings they used to decipher the alphabets, read the clock for work timings, add and subtract their wage and bonuses and tape folk songs in the machine that Namra carried with him." It appears here that this first generation of Oraon learners helped Namra and Anuradha to develop their course content, activity games and pedagogy-

"The Oraon families, who migrated to Shahdol from Sarguja and Raigarh districts, carved out small farms for themselves on barren land in the interiors. Our elders carted off the stones, felled the trees and ploughed the soil on their own small plots. The children who learned how to grow vegetables in the farm, made their own farm productive after two years," recounts Manik.

Using the technology they had picked up, the Oraons gradually increased their surplus. And with the confidence born out of this surplus as well as their native militancy, sharpened by what they had learnt and observed in the educa-



Shyam Bahadur Namra and Anuradha training the learners.

tional process, they helped their families to resist the pressures of landlords and police, rich farmers and cattle owners, officials and bureaucrats, all determined to dispossess them of land, once barren and now a source of food.

Shankar, a Gond adivasi villager says, "A significant number of middle and rich farmers have taken to vegetable cultivation as they have realised that cereal production does not fetch more profit." Taking a cue from the rich farmers, educated professionals have shown an inclination towards purchasing land and developing it for agricultural use in Jamadi and nearby villages.

Dulhera, a farmer who belongs to the Baiga tribe says, "What has been a turning point in the lives of the adivasis is that they have jumped from traditional cereal crop Kodo, to the stage of cash crop cultivation."

On being asked how 'prakartik kheti' (natural farming) has benefitted them, Felix Oraon, a class X pass youth replies, "Our tribes do not promote curiosity and interest in learning. This has been our cultural heritage. Namra and Anuradha have transformed the outlook of the backward adivasis. We came to know about natural/organic farming for the first time at Ankur farm. The modern method of farming prescribes the extensive use of fertilisers, pesticides and other expensive inputs. Remedies in modern farming are counter-productive. Learners at Shram Niketan are informed very practically, that plants, animals and insects are inextricably linked in a complex web of inter-dependence, with air, water, soil, minerals and other natural resources play vital roles."

Explaining about organic farming, Felix says, "While cultivating, we saw how the worms perform the function of carrying the dead organic matter in to the ground. When organisms die and decompose, they become 'humus'. This essentially prevents soil erosion, the water is allowed to percolate, without damaging the soil surface. Humus is released gradually and the nutrients are passed down to plant roots. Organic farming maintains the balance necessary to sustain higher and lower life-water forms." Felix's knowledge astounds. His tribal upbringing has not been a hindrance to his progress. His fellow brethren appreciate his adroitness and patience in making his younger siblings and others understand the intricacies of farming in a most simple and lucid style. Elders think that his learning at Shram Niketan has increased his motivation, self-esteem, confidence and ability.

Bijju, an elderly man from the Kol tribe, speaks a mixture of Hindi and Baghel Khandi, a local dialect, and says, "A tribal girl who learnt at the Ankur farm had

the potential to cover the five-year course in just one-and-a-half years. On her own initiative, she started teaching her younger siblings and other children in her home." However, this was not a general phenomenon.

Acknowledging his debt to Namra and Anuradha, Bijju says, "Shram Niketan gave us literacy and changed our way of life. Earlier, we were kept in the dark. After our training, there has been a rapid transformation. Now we think and ask questions before adopting anything, including any new method on our 'kheti' (land).

Post the non-formal education experiment, Namra developed a set of two primers, *Akshar Se Maitri* and *Bala Babli Ki Kahani*. In these, Namra continues to emphasise development skills and political consciousness in the broadest sense, rather than seeing the model as melting into the national mainstream, which is the priority of most governmental NFE programmes. Both books, particularly *Akshar Se Maitri* help children explore their creative potential, through exercises and games, interspersed with Namra's excellent poetry. *Bala Babli...* handles sensitively, the issue of different social expectations for, and experiences of, boys and girls. The primers are used as readers in South Bihar's east and west Singhbhum districts, Shahdol's Catholic Mission in its work with neo-literates and Raipur's Church Development and Relief Committee. *Bala Babli* has been translated into Oriya by Agragamee, a voluntary organisation working in the Sambalpur

district.

Working on the farm and developing primers, takes much of Namra's and Anuradha's time. Even then, they intervene and mobilise the local villagers on issues like remunerative prices for tomatoes, pollution in the surrounding villages emitted by the factories of Karnataka Explosive Ltd, Birla Paper Mills and collieries in the area.

When questioned about how he sees Shram Niketan in today's perspective, Namra frankly admits that the vision of Shram Niketan is a more powerful one, and that had he had the resources, he would have liked to implement the programme in a much larger sphere. To facilitate the NFE model, the couple generated their own funds, without tapping national or foreign funding agencies.

However, Namra feels that given today's 'anti-poor' and vitiated education system, Shram Niketan cannot be anything more than an 'island of excellence'. "We cannot hope for major changes or improvements in the system. All we can do is experiment and create models and hope that at an appropriate time, these will be accepted for general use."

If culturally synchronised and production-oriented non-formal education models are effectively put to use by dedicated individuals, they can help mitigate the illiteracy among marginalised sections of society, the adivasis and Dalits without any assistance from the government.

H Tarun Bose is a Delhi-based freelance journalist.