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# Lessons lost in Champaran

ANURADHA NAGARAJ reports on the disintegration of the 'basic' schools set up by Gandhiji

**"This was the best basic school in the district and I used to teach here. We had 500 students, bright, and full of promise. But now they are all gone."**

**S**WERVE off the macadamised road at Lohariya village in West Champaran district, struggle through a couple of kilometres of *kuccha* road and you will reach a desolate building. Wandering through the corridors of this sprawling ruin, Namdev Tiwari goes back in time: the year Mahatma Gandhi visited Champaran and unleashed the education revolution,

It began in the 1940s with the dream of one man and the aspirations of thousands. After his campaign to free the farmers from the oppression of indigo growers, the Mahatma raised the issue of setting up "basic schools," in Champaran. At the Wardha Education Conference in 1937 the concept of basic schools was formalised as the kind of education system the country should have.

"It was a simple concept. The bottom line was that all knowledge should emerge out of productive work by children. It was a pedagogic education system merging the world of work and the world of knowledge explains Professor Anil Sadgopal of the Department of Education of Delhi University.

The curriculum told teachers how to use the spinning wheel as a tool for teaching the rules of motion and thereby teach Physics. Similarly, it suggested using the cotton grown in the area to teach students about the economics of farming and trade laws. The concept of tensility was to be taught with the help of the thread spun on the *charkha*.

"Till the late 80s the concept worked well," reminisces Tiwari. "But today parents would rather cough up money to give their children the kind of education we imparted in these schools," he says ruefully.

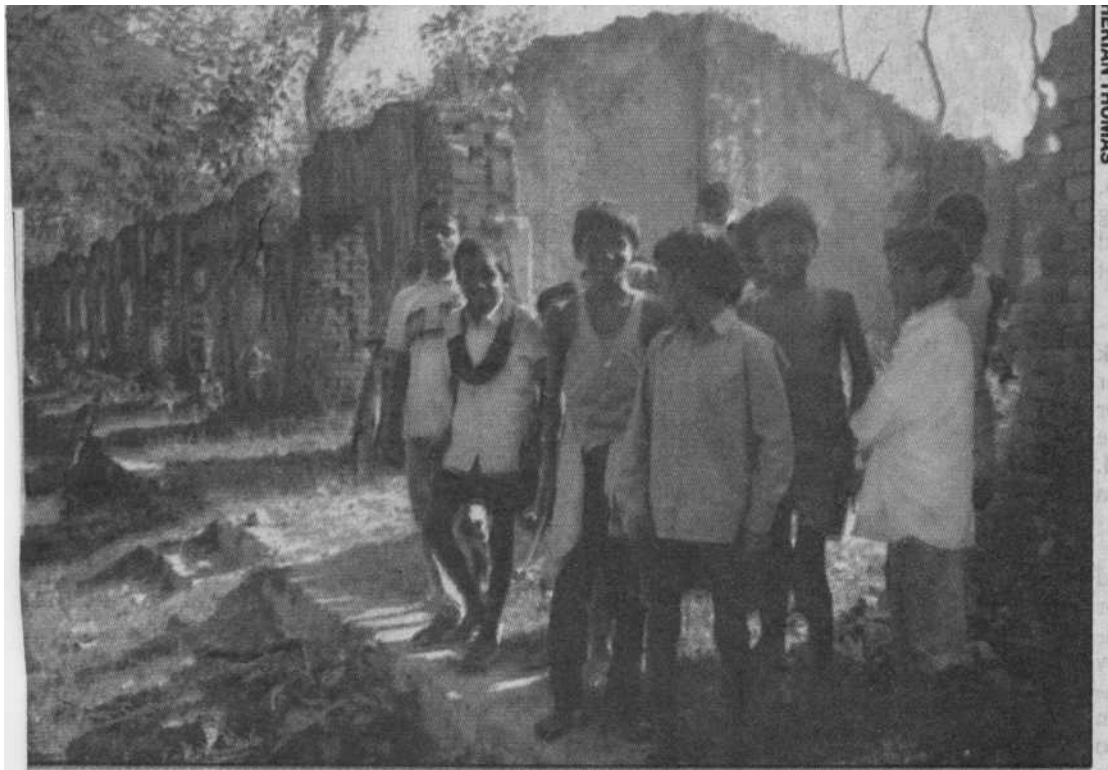
And nobody tells the story of "these schools" better than the villagers of Bithiharwah a sleepy village in the



Brindavan Compact Area of Bihar.

Settling down outside his hut, 70-year-old Shambunath Mishra takes the story forward. "Gandhiji came here and opened one of the first basic schools in Brindavan," Mishra says, before pausing to take a long sip of tea. "Kasturba stayed here with their son, teaching in the school, helping other teachers understand the concept. In that run-down building you see over there, education was imparted, in the real sense."

Mishra's eight-year-old grandson comes running upto him. He is not in



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**CRUMBLING DREAMS: Children at a loose end loitering before a dilapidated school**

school on a Monday morning because his teacher has gone to the bank. And since his is a one-teacher government school, *masterji's bank trip means chutti*.

Seeing his grandson loiter around the village aimlessly upsets Mishra. "He is missing out on so much," he grumbles. Back then, when I went to the basic schools, I learnt so much more than just the alphabets. I would have liked Roshan to go to the same

school. But all that stands in place of that great institution today is a dilapidated building."

Mishra's school is one of the 350 odd basic schools across truncated Bihar that are in shambles. The buildings are crumbling, the playgrounds have been encroached upon, the teachers are missing and so are the students. The decay began with one broken beam, a fused bulb and a few drop-outs. But it just took a few years for flourishing schools to close down.

In Champaran district, of the 43 schools that were into integrated

learning, four have closed down. The remaining 39 run on paper. They get their funds, have their teachers, have register full of students enrolled, but education is not happening here.

In the compound of the school in Lohariya, Nagender Paswan is struggling with a banner announcing the arrival of a local leader. The chairman of the Vrindavan Village Education Committee, he spends most of his time sprucing up the only intact corner of the basic school building for rallies when he is supposed to ensure that the schools function properly.

"I try," he says in self-defence, giving up on the banner. "There are four teachers in this school and I think 250 students are enrolled at present. The classes are held out in the open. So during the monsoons, there are no classes. Rest of the year, well, classes happen, but not very regularly."

Miles away, in the crowded city of Patna, a group of men sit and collate information. At the State Institute of Education Management and Training (SIEMAT) office, officials keep adding the same numbers, trying to make the literacy rates look good. "But we all know the reality," says an official. "The sad thing is that the basic schools had everything going for them. When they were started, it was ensured that they had enough land, a good pool of teachers and enough funding. But post independence, the Indian government rejected the model. But a few state governments retained the concept. Everything is there on paper, but on ground they have nothing."

Revival is a term used very cautiously in the education ministry. Meetings have been chaired by the primary education minister, old text books have been dug out to understand what made basic schools work and groups have been assigned the task of planning a grand revival.

While the government machinery insists that things are getting back on the right track, for Tiwari and Mishra, the good old days will never return in their lifetime. But for his grandson's sake, Mishra hopes that something as basic as education in a great institution like the basic school will be revived. •