

## **In Rajasthan desert, education for girl child blooms**

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*In the villages of Rajasthan, where teenaged girls are seldom sent to school, one organisation is trying to script a change*

In the 68 years since Independence, one the biggest obstacles in the path of development has been improving the standards and reach of education in rural India. Among rural children, the most vulnerable segment is of teenage girls, especially in North India. On the one hand, poor, marginalised communities consider the education of their daughters as least important. On the other, the lack of toilets and poor teaching standards make you question whether or not rural education makes a difference in children's lives at all.

This is what makes the efforts of the Rajasthan-based Centre for Unfolding of Learning Potential (CULP) significant. "We've been working in rural Rajasthan since 2001 to ensure access to quality elementary education to out-of-school children, especially girls, and improve the teaching-learning processes in mainstream schools," says OP Kulhari, who co-founded CULP along with educationist Lalit Kishore and social scientist MS Rathore.

They've met with rather unprecedented success. In the last 14 years, CULP's efforts have enabled 30,000 girls to return to mainstream school. One lakh students, mostly girls, have benefited from its school improvement programmes. Across the 760 villages of Rajasthan where CULP has worked — in some places with partner NGOs — one can see girls, even those who are married, in school. This is quite a change as almost 100 per cent of them were out of school before CULP intervened. The story of CULP shows that transformation does not always need big ideas; sometimes even a small idea and a questioning mind can be a powerful instrument of change.

It all began in 2001 when Kulhari, Kishore and Rathore saw the first discouraging field results: almost no girl above the age of nine in the village they surveyed was in school. With years of experience in the education sector (Kulhari had been associated with several government and non-government education programmes, such as Lok Jumbish, in Rajasthan), the trio analysed why girls dropped out of school. There were, expectedly, very laidback attitudes towards the education of girls in their field area — the rural hinterland of Jaipur. "Many villagers here migrate for a few months every year to Gujarat for work. Most families would take their girls out of

school, having no place to leave them behind to continue their studies. This led to a huge number of drop outs,” Kulhari says. CULP field operatives sat with the families, patiently making them understand how necessary it was to educate their daughters. They helped young girls set up “Kishori Manchs” (forums for teenage girls) in villages to enable them to voice their opinions and gain strength from one another. “At the end, most parents (and some in-laws) agreed to send their girls back to school,” he says.



There was, however, another problem. Most programmes to bring out-of-school children back to mainstream education were failing. Could it be because the curriculum wasn't age appropriate for them? “Students often became disinterested and dropped out again as there was a dissonance between their scholastic level and age,” says Kulhari. “It made us question how we as educationists could expect a 14-year-old to be comfortable in a class of eight-year-olds. How could she be stimulated with textbooks designed for children half her age?”

The CULP team worked on an innovative Bridge Course that integrated age-appropriate learning tools with lessons on life skills and adolescent health issues to enable out-of-school students to catch up with school-going children of their age. “We advocated that before they returned to mainstream school, the students must undergo such Bridge Courses,” says Kulhari.

In 2002, they launched their flagship programme, Pehchan, to engage with adolescent girls and their families, establishing linkages with the government's education-for-all scheme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Today, Bridge Courses have been made a part of the Right to Education programme in Rajasthan. "We have also worked with mainstream schools to improve teaching standards and make their infrastructure girl-child friendly," says Kulhari. CULP's focus on community support has also made its interventions more sustainable in the long term.

What has made the CULP model relatively easy to scale is its extensive field partnerships. "We were the first partners of Room to Read in Rajasthan and are a part of several networks at the national and state level, like SRIJAN for young people's reproductive and sexual health rights, and the Rajasthan RTE Consortium. This has enabled our work to have a great impact," says Kulhari. Working with the government rather than outside it has also helped. "Not only have we been able to harness its many excellent schemes, we have also been able to influence policy changes on education," he adds.

In the next three years, CULP plans to expand its programme to up to 500 villages, some of which are in predominantly tribal and poverty-stricken districts like Alwar and Bhilwara. Kulhari says, "It's only when adolescent girls have access to proper education that gender discrimination, child marriage and other social evils can be wiped out. In many ways, the key to transforming rural and tribal societies lies in the education of young girls."

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