

Free Schools India

Education and development

The pace of change in rural India...

For the people of Chakarsi, the village where we have built our first school, life has not changed very much in a lifetime. Dada-ji, who is in his eighties and is a close friend of our family, has lived and worked in the area for almost his entire life, and has seen the region stagnate through that period. Dada-ji remembers India under colonial rule, as well as the move towards independence and the subsequent upheaval. He has seen how India was administered during colonial times, and says that things were much more orderly then, and that since independence there has been a slide into 'dogs' rule'. He, along with many others, would love to see India 's general situation and prospects improve and return to order, but under domestic rule this time.

The major changes which have occurred in village life over the last century are few, and include the introduction of bicycles (Dada-ji told us about how everyone was amazed to see him riding his bicycle into the village for the first time, and how the children ran down the dusty roads after him in awe and amazement), and then motorcycles, cars and tractors. Cars are still few and far between, and tractors are the only modern additions to the old farming techniques. In short, modernity has had only a minor impact on village life.

The impact of corruption and bad governance

Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) is the state that lies between Delhi , the Capital, and Nepal , and is one of the most under-developed states in all of India . The government is not interested in making a concerted effort to improve the situation, and what money is supposed to go into infrastructure, services and education is mostly siphoned off into the pockets of corrupt officials. In turn, this endemic corruption is leading to a situation where foreign donors are no longer prepared to help, as they see the governance problems as too large to tackle, and they understandably do not wish to waste their money. Non-governmental organisations (NGO's) are also seen as unaccountable and often corrupt, meaning that it is hard to find honest and diligent partners already working within U.P. with whom to team up. It should be fairly clear then who suffers in all of this: the people of U.P. They can do nothing to make people interested in helping them again, because they cannot change, all at once, the way their government behaves, and they cannot make sure that money gets to where it is meant to go. This situation has resulted in a vicious circle meaning that people need help to break out of the situation they are in, while because of that situation, people are not prepared to help. So these people do only what they can do, which is to look after their families as best they can, and many times they do not even do that as well as they could, if they were better educated.

In Chakarsi, as with many other rural, isolated villages in India , there are not many people well-off enough, or socially minded enough to try to make a difference by taking action on their own. To this day the road to Chakarsi would still be a dirt road, dry and dusty most of the time, but muddy and impassible during Monsoon, had it not been for the private initiative of one individual, who had the existing brick

road built. Also, unless we had decided to build this school, there would have been no investment in helping the people of the area from any other source; that is guaranteed. The educational facilities that exist are only marginally better than nothing at all, and in U.P. as a whole, the state education system which is meant to be free (but is still not) is being marginalised by the rise in private education. This has a terribly bad effect with serious consequences: state schools are seen as the lowest of the low, and are not even free of cost, as they should be. Therefore people are not fighting for improvement in their state schools because they are perceived as beyond hope, which leads to more neglect and so a worsening of the problem. Everyone who can afford any fees at all send their children to low quality private schools because they are to a small degree better than the state schools. Sadly though the main reason for being of these private schools is to make money out of poor people, and they often print their own books for which they charge twice as much as books available in the shops, purely for profit.

The schooling system as a whole is only helping the region to continue in its present retrograde slide. Education is key to helping people to develop themselves and their areas into something better, and to live in a healthier, more efficient way. Education is important to many areas of life, and this value is already perceived by most people in India, which means that the first part of our work is achieved for us already. Judging from the response in the area, the local perception is that this school project is a very good thing, and that it is needed and valued. Proof of this is that people have been coming from the earliest stages to get admission to our school, while we have not yet been ready! Also, when out in the fields during harvest season, a woman came up to us and told us that currently she signs her name by giving her thumb print, as she is completely illiterate. She told us that she wants to start studying at our school as well, to learn to read and write. This was highly encouraging as we had not even told the people yet that we are planning on offering adult education as well.

The indicators of development and what development really means

As stated, life in the village is still at least a century behind 'modernity' in almost every area of activity. The only way to kick-start change is through education, as there is no other way that people will come to learn broader ways of thinking, and better ways of doing things. Development in conventional terms is often measured by the numbers of tractors, paved roads, machines, and other tangible things that can be seen and measured. However real development comes when patterns of thinking are changed, and when people start to think in a more social way, and gain an understanding of the fact that often what is good for the community is good for the individual as well, and so thinking only about oneself and one's immediate family is not always the most efficient thing.

An example of where development of thinking is needed concerns the road that was mentioned above, built out of brick in order to remain passable throughout the year. Since the road has been built, cuts have been made in it, where people have simply taken the bricks away and cut right through because they feel jealous and think that it was built to bring prestige and importance to its builder. Others have cut through the road for drainage, and have not thought about the trouble this causes for cars and buffalo carts trying to use the road. Other solutions could have been found, such as a drain under the road, however these people have simply done the only thing that immediately sprang to mind and not thought or cared about how others will be inconvenienced. Therefore, one can see that while a road is a good thing for development in an area, the road alone does not mean that true change and development is really happening.

For true development there needs to be a corresponding change in thinking and behaviour. This can be seen on an even bigger scale on the National Highway 24 which leads from Delhi towards the village and

then out to the east, and which has been built into a proper motorway for a distance with the help of the Japanese government's development agency. Again, this road is a vast improvement on normal Indian roads, and has full metal barriers down the sides to stop pedestrians and carts from using it. However, the efficiency and usefulness of this road has still been decreased due to the fact that local farmers have simply broken the side barriers down in some places in order to get onto the road with their carts. They can often be seen going down the wrong side of this road with large loads of sugarcane, which seriously detracts from the safety of the road, downgrading it from a good, high-speed road to one where one still has to be looking out for any and all types of road users. Again, this is because the physical infrastructure has not been mirrored by a corresponding change and improvement in people's thinking.

Of course roads and other physical improvements are needed. However, without simultaneous investment in educating people to use these improvements and maintain them in the proper way, these assets depreciate to nothing. There have been many development projects where inappropriately complex technologies have been given to rural communities who lack the know-how to maintain and use this technology over the long run. In such cases tractors, for example, have been used and discarded where they break down, because of the lack of knowledge needed to maintain and repair them.

The role of education in stimulating development

This is where education comes in, and where it is needed. As stated, tractors, cars and roads do not necessarily mean development even though they are the obvious things that the eye detects as indicators of development. Education is vitally necessary to fight what Dada-ji described as 'dogs' rule', and to get communities to start thinking more as communities, rather than simply as individual units that are only after their own advancement. In addition to this, individuals need to become educated in order even to look after their own concerns more efficiently, as illustrated by the example of two brothers in a village in U.P. who each inherited the equal sums of money. While one of the brothers decided to invest in a tractor, thus improving his farm and increasing his income, the other brother hoarded away his money and never used it. In the end he forgot where he hid the money and his farm is much worse off than the farm of his brother, who invested the money wisely. Many rural people need to expand their thinking and become flexible enough to see that sometimes they have to spend some of their hard-earned and saved money, in order to bring improvements to their property and their lives, rather than just hoarding it away.

They also need to think more as a community and see that this also often leads to improvement in their own individual lives. I as a foreigner asked my husband why they had not fixed the cuts in the village road that their neighbours had made for their own drainage. I suggested perhaps two planks over the cuts so the car could pass much more easily. This suggestion was dismissed because someone would come along and steal the planks, just another illustration of where people do not see that there is a common value in leaving something for everyone to use. Again, we see education as one of the only ways in which to combat this type of thinking and to help these people develop to their full potential. Education, while a very slow, long-term solution to many problems, is vitally necessary because there is absolutely nothing that can be substituted for it.

Clear evidence of the link between Development and Education

There are some clear, obvious ways in which education aids and stimulates development. For example, education leads to smaller family size, which enables families to provide for their (fewer) children better, having more resources to spend on educating each child. It also leads to mothers being more informed,

and knowing how to cope with childhood illnesses better. It means that parents can administer medicines efficiently because it enables them to read the instructions on the bottles, and leads also to cleaner, more hygienic homes, and so less illness to begin with. Health care is also vitally necessary for such developments and is entirely complementary to education, as it has been found in one report* that easy access to healthcare means that school attendance is greater, because children are not forced to stay home so frequently either for their own illnesses or to care for a family member. Health also contributes to smaller family size because families become more confident in their children's survival, so feel the need to have fewer babies, again meaning increased schooling opportunities for those they do have.

Education also brings the ability to use newer techniques in farming and industry, and to think through problems more efficiently, including problems that require cooperation to solve, like local disputes, and the greater problems of disease, environment and population control. It has been seen to increase earning potential and the potential to acquire and use new skills.

Education does not mean the destruction of or encroachment into traditional values or practices, and there is nothing that implies that long-held beliefs or practices must all change in order for communities to develop. Education does usually inevitably lead to some such changes, for example to less child marriage and other traditional practices which can be harmful, for example in Africa, less female genital mutilation, which is demonstrably counter-productive. Rural communities can keep their culture, heritage, and traditions while becoming educated, and living in a more efficient, healthier way.

The Problem of 'Brain Drain '

Many times when people in India become educated, they come to feel that the work they were doing before is not good enough any longer, and that they should move on, either to the city or abroad, to find 'better' work. 'Brain drain', as it has come to be called, has become a major problem, and it is a phenomenon that we will actively discourage. This is because there is already extreme population pressure and unemployment in the cities, for the educated as well as un-educated, and so without fail rural people who migrate to the cities end up living in unhealthy, unhygienic, and crime-ridden slums, in a situation far worse than what they left behind in the village. Therefore we will be seeking to encourage people to stay in the village and build the community, by becoming better farmers, and having fewer, more highly educated children. We also want to introduce other sustainable, money-making schemes for these people, by introducing some small scale industries like the stitching of clothing, the assembling of bead jewelry, and even the making of handmade paper products (in the future). These can be for both the domestic and export markets, and we will do our best to promote these products. In summary, the goal is to educate people and find some concrete incentives for them to stay in the village.

Conclusions

This article has not been intended to give academic reasons for a connection between education and development, but has been intended more to give a contextual picture of why education is so necessary in order to stimulate development. The basic premise on which our school is being founded is that there can be no true development without education, and physical improvements alone can only really mask a deeper problem. We do not have the funding to make any major infrastructure changes in the village, other than the addition of our extremely substantial school building, and we would not do so even if we could. This is because we strongly feel that education and development of people's thinking is the only way to bring real, lasting change for the better. The aim of this article is that the reader will have taken

away a better understanding of how education is the bedrock of development and the key to a better life, although the road to significant change is a long and difficult one, admittedly. We do not have any illusions of sparking great and overwhelming change; however we feel that we have been given a choice: either to see the problems around us and to decry them and do nothing, hoping someone else will take action, or to get to work. We have chosen the latter option, and are hoping that we can do something of some value, no matter how small.

Updated 24 September 2004