

ENLIGHTENMENT FOR CHILDREN

Community Schools in South India

BY STEPHANIE FISCHER

IN A COUNTRY that has one-third as many teachers per capita as North America and a serious scarcity of schools, especially in rural areas and urban slums, poor children are often left behind when it comes to education. But Sarat Babu Vasireddy, an educator and advocate for children's rights, who has founded a system of community-run schools in the slums of Hyderabad, is proving that poor communities do not have to wait—

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and hope—for the government to provide schools for their children.

Besides making education accessible to a previously unserved group of children, Sarat Babu has succeeded, with his Baljyothi (Enlightenment for Children) schools, in placing school governance in the hands of students, parents, teachers, and communities. Although some private schools for the privileged in India have already experimented with this model of school governance, Sarat Babu has applied it to a very different population—slum residents, who, until he came on the scene, had neither the means nor the awareness to help their children get an education.

The program started in 1996 in Hyderabad, a city of nearly 5 million people and the capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh, with three schools and 7,000 students. It now comprises 200 schools and serves 21,000 students between the ages of 5 and 14, none of

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SARAT BABU VASIREDDY



(Right) Second- and third-grade students share a classroom in the Bhagat Singh Colony school.

whom have previously attended school. For 5-year-olds, the standard age for beginning school in India, classes run from 8:45 a.m. to 3 p.m., 200 days a year. "Bridge Schools," offering 10-hour sessions, 260 days a year, help children who are beginning school between ages 7 and 10 to catch up on what they have missed. Still older children can attend a special yearlong residential camp to bring them up to speed. (The need for Bridge Schools and residential camps is diminishing as more and more children in the areas served by the Baljyothi schools start school at the standard age.)

Student-teacher ratios vary between one teacher for 20 students in Bridge Schools to one for 40 in the regular Baljyothi schools—in contrast to the 70-student class size that is common in government schools. The program is very successful in retaining the children it enrolls—only 5 percent drop out. As a result, it also serves as the scholastic preparation for youngsters who want to enter mainstream government schools

when they finish elementary school. Already, 10,000 children who have completed the program in one of the Baljyothi schools are continuing their education in government schools.

The per-pupil cost in a Baljyothi school is \$16 a year; and it costs \$1,500 a year to run a school. The schools are funded mainly from various government sources. However, Sarat Babu has also encouraged the community to invest in the schools—financially and otherwise—reflecting his conviction that if the schools are firmly grounded in the community, they are much more likely to succeed.

Motivating Parents

Sarat Babu Vasireddy has had a long familiarity with the group of people served by Baljyothi schools. Although he studied engineering in college, he joined the civil liberties movement while still in school and later went to work for a children's rights organization



(Left) An extension to the BJR Nagar school built by members of the community when the original school became too crowded. (Above) A free play period at the BJR Nagar school.



Another combined-grade class in one of Sarat Babu Vasireddy's Baljyothi schools. In a government-run school, a class might be twice as large as this one.

called the M.V. Foundation. His work for M.V. involved getting children who lived on the streets into classrooms. This experience, as well as his work as a champion for child laborers, tribal people, and handloom weavers, convinced him that poverty and child labor are not the decisive factors in keeping children from attending school. The obstacle, he decided, is twofold. Parents often do not understand the importance of sending their children to school. And as people who have not gone to school themselves, they may be intimidated and uncomfortable at the very idea. But access is an even bigger problem. Schools, where they exist, are likely to be overcrowded and lacking basic necessities—like books and teachers who can be relied on to show up every day.

Sarat Babu sees his principal task as creating a demand that his schools can supply: “motivating parents to send their children to school, continuing the persuasion until the parents get into the habit of sending the children regularly, and demystifying education through community involvement and governance.” In the case of working children, other voluntary organizations have sometimes assisted families in making up the loss of income so they do not withdraw the youngsters from school. For example, Bamma, mother of 9-year-old Velu, was given a sewing machine with which she could more than make up the income lost as a re-

sult of her son’s going to school. However, Sarat Babu does not believe in offering incentives as bribes to parents. “If we do that,” he says, “they will send their children to school for the incentives rather than the education. We need to teach parents the importance of investing in their children’s futures.”

In fact, the demand for education seems to be growing. When Sarat Babu’s organization recently conducted a study in 800 of Hyderabad’s 1,000 slums, an overwhelming 95 percent of those questioned were in favor of education. But, as Sarat Babu says, if you want to get at parents’ real attitudes toward education, you have to pose the right questions. If a questioner asks parents’ opinions about the state education system, they are likely to give a vote of no-confidence, but when asked if they want their children to be part of the new educated generation, they answer in the affirmative. In fact, Sarat Babu notes that in places where a good school is available, even in rural areas, fewer children work.

The speed with which the Baljyothi schools have spread provides ample evidence of parents’ willingness to embrace the idea of education for their children in community-run schools. When people in the slums surrounding the three original schools saw for themselves what had been achieved, they came to Sarat Babu and requested schools for their community. He did not have to sell his idea; it sold itself.

Community Control

The fruitful cooperation between the school and the community that Sarat Babu Vasireddy has brought about contrasts sharply with the relationship between India's government schools for the poor and the communities they serve. In Sarat Babu's model, parents select the school governing board yearly, and teachers are responsible for running the school, whereas state schools are run from a distance by state or federal government employees. The government controls the selection of teachers, curriculum, and administrators. It assigns certified teachers to posts in various cities and villages, where the teachers have no connections or loyalty. It's not uncommon for teachers' salaries to be held up for two or three months—or for teachers to stop attending classes without even notifying education officials. Central control saps local initiative and prevents teachers from developing ties to the community and a feeling of accountability to students and parents. While India does have a number of private schools that offer superior education, these are strictly for the privileged.

The running of the Baljyothi schools is in the hands of parents and teachers, who form management com-

mittees. While teachers maintain primary responsibility for managing the schools, mothers' committees recommend teachers and act as watchdogs to ensure the smooth functioning of schools. And management and mothers' committees meet regularly to solve day-to-day problems. For example, the single biggest challenge that the schools encountered was absenteeism of students from single-parent families. In cases where this was a problem, the committee approached the parents and provided counseling about the importance of regular attendance. The nearly nonexistent absentee rate is evidence of the strategy's success.

There is nothing fancy about most of the school facilities, as Sarat Babu admits. Half of the schools are located in houses; some are in community halls; and a large number are rented. In many slums, Sarat Babu says, it is hard even to find land on which to build a school. But the involvement of parents is such that some communities have schools that parents have built themselves. Sarat Babu calls them his "fortunate schools."

In the Classroom

Students of all ages study together in the classrooms of

Education in India

The constitution of India says that the government is responsible for providing primary and elementary schooling, free of charge, to all citizens. In fact, the reality often falls short of this principle.

Primary and elementary education (roughly up through our eighth grade) takes place, for the most part, in schools run by state governments or local organizations. These schools do not charge tuition. But schools run by non-profit organizations, including religious groups, can receive grants from the government. These are known as government-aided schools. Sarat Babu's schools are in this category. There are also private schools, which compete for pupils with the government schools.

In rural India, 68 percent of school-going children attend government schools; 22 percent, government-aided schools; and 10 percent, privately managed schools. Twelve percent more children attend school in urban areas than in the countryside.

In the lower primary grades (grades 1-4), all teaching is done in one of India's numerous "mother

tongues," depending on the state where the school is located. (In Hyderabad, the language is Telegu.) The standard subjects are reading, writing, elementary math, environmental studies, hygiene, crafts, and physical education. At the higher primary level (grades 5-8), children study at least two languages—the mother tongue and the national language or English. Other subjects include math (e.g., algebra), some standard sciences—physics, soil science, zoology, chemistry—history, geography, civics, moral science, art, and crafts.

But the syllabus does not necessarily reflect the quality of education students get at government schools. Because the schools pay poorly—and often irregularly—teaching is usually a job of last resort for educated Indians. This means there is a shortage of teachers, and teaching can be of poor quality.

Facilities are also a problem. It is not uncommon for a school to have ill-equipped laboratories (where they exist at all), a scarcity of teaching aids (including textbooks), and no toilets. And such

as they are, schools are often scarce. Schools—and this includes government schools—are not usually to be found in slum areas. In rural areas, children may have to walk four or five miles to get to a school.

School may also be too expensive, especially for the rural poor, either because they can't afford to pay for uniforms, books and stationery, as well as the cost of transportation to and from school, or because their children must work to help support the family. In some cases, parents simply don't see the value of an education, especially for girls, who, they say, are just going to get married.

Given all these problems, it is no surprise that at least half of the adult population of India is illiterate (two-thirds of the women). However, there is a growing trend in favor of education—especially in Andhra Pradesh, where Sarat Babu lives and works. Even the poorest parents there are increasingly willing to send their children to school and are ready to take on extra work to see that their kids can attend school—a trend that is undoubtedly reflected in the spectacular growth of Sarat Babu's schools. □

the community schools. They work from the same textbooks as students in government schools, but the material is modified to reflect the interests and needs of poor children who come from a background where education is unknown. Some of the curriculum is devoted to issues that are particularly relevant to the community, such as sanitation, health, pollution, and communal harmony. Teachers rarely assign homework because most students do not live in conditions that are conducive to doing schoolwork at home. However, as already noted, Baljyothi schools are giving many children the skills and confidence to continue their education in government schools along with relatively more privileged children.

Sarat Babu recruits teachers from the local community. He first conducts workshops with young, unemployed adults from the slums, which are aimed at getting them to rethink the options for their lives and to visualize themselves as possible community leaders. From these groups, he identifies young women with the potential for becoming teachers; in this selection, Sarat Babu relies heavily on the recommendations of the mothers' committees.

All teachers are required to have finished high school (which in India is 10th grade). Sarat Babu selects only women because, he says, they "have more tact than men." This choice represents a challenge to traditional values. Because the place of women is considered to be in the home, girls in India are often not given access to education—much less the opportunity to participate in the education of others. Baljyothi teachers earn more than they would in any other job,

and often receive better training than government teachers. In addition to pedagogical training, their orientation includes a 15-day program that teaches them how to interact with the community on educational issues. Because the teachers are young and from the same community as their pupils, there is a certain informality and closeness between the students and teachers. And in addition to learning subject matter, children learn that education can be part of the life of people like them—even a profession they might aspire to.

Local and National Support

Baljyothi schools have been successful because they are based on an idea that has a strong intrinsic appeal. As Sarat Babu puts it, "First we want to develop children's confidence and feelings of social equality. Second, they should acquire minimum standards of education for their age and have the enthusiasm and perseverance to continue with their studies." Because Baljyothi schools are community-based, they have built a powerful support network of diverse groups—policy advocacy groups, informal labor groups, youth clubs, voluntary organizations (like UNICEF), and government agencies. Fifty of the schools have been adopted by local citizen organizations.

The state government has been supportive through departments beyond the Ministry of Education. The National Child Labor Program, the Adult Education Program, and the Women and Child Welfare Department, all provide financial assistance to Sarat Babu's work. "I firmly believe," he says, "that going to school is the right of a child. And the child cannot be deprived of that right by anybody, whether it be a parent, society, or government." But he does not believe that the current education system can make this right a reality: "Ultimately, decentralization of schools must become standard policy."

Sarat Babu's success with the Baljyothi schools shows some of the ramifications of this vision. Putting administrative control of the schools in the hands of the slum residents has encouraged them to make decisions for themselves, and it has generated a powerful energy directed toward social ends. Furthermore, shifting a majority of children from being wage-earners to students has also helped to transform the culture of the communities where schools have been founded.

The schools are an immeasurable gift to the children in these communities. The children who had been laborers were helped to regain their lost childhood. Yadaiah, a teacher in one of the Baljyothi schools "where most of the students were daily wage earners" talks about how it raised their spirits and their view of themselves "when they were addressed and treated as students and not laborers." And for every child, the schools make possible a future that they formerly would not have been able to imagine.

But the benefit goes beyond the here and now in the slums of Hyderabad. That is what Sarat Babu is talking about when he says, "I've never seen educated parents who didn't want education for their children." The seeds that are being planted today in Hyderabad will continue to bear fruit in the next generation and beyond. □

A Postscript

In late August 2000, Hyderabad was devastated by flash floods that followed three days of continuous rain. The floods left 45 people dead and nearly 40,000 homeless. Poor people, many living in flimsy huts built along Hyderabad's waterways, suffered the most serious losses. Seventy of the city's 1,000 slum areas were simply washed away.

In Sarat Babu Vasireddy's district of Khairatabad, more than 1,000 dwellings collapsed under the impact of the flood waters, and 5,000 families lost their homes and all of their possessions, including clothing, food, and cooking utensils.

But the very day this happened, Sarat Babu and his team of school teachers went into action. They opened community kitchens funded by the government, and distributed clean water in Khairatabad and Mushirabad, another nearby district of Hyderabad. They also set up medical camps where people who were sick or injured could receive treatment. The community organization that Sarat Babu had created for his schools paid additional dividends in this emergency by helping to prevent malnutrition and the outbreaks of waterborne diseases like dysentery that are such a big risk during times of flood.—*Editor*