



## NFE in Rural Areas – An Experiential Account

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**N**FE, Non-formal Education, in a semi urban village area has aspects of uneven development. It has communal, caste, and political colour. As a teacher the experience of applying innovative educational approaches to make learning more meaningful was enriching, real, and satisfying. The role of NGOs and the community is critical in starting an sustaining educational programme. However, how the programme is to be continued, and how education is to be conceptualised, remains masked. This is where the approaches deviated from the community's participation, needs, and demands.

I decided to choose a village for my block placement after much introspection. It was my first tryst with NFE and education in a village area. I found myself a total novice to the realities and status of education in Indian villages. At the end of my block

placement I wished that I had chosen a school internship for my teacher training programme. Experience in a village was more enriching, real, and satisfying than in the corporation schools in Delhi. It was more rewarding because of the presence of an NGO as well. The NGO had already created a niche in the form of NFE centres, convincing the villagers, and finding the teachers. Since the NGO had community partnership approach for the development programmes in the village, the communication bond was strong with the villagers.

### **Placement**

Village D and adjoining villages (in a 10 kilometre radius) lie in Uttar Pradesh, 50 kilometres away from Delhi. Industrialisation has swamped the stretch of villages. The government's thermal power station was the first one to come. It was followed by an international brand, a soft drink company. These days an Indian tycoon

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in collaboration with a foreign millionaire has announced the start of a project too.



It is therefore, often in the news due to the political tussle over the local issues of development and industrialisation.

Though the development (especially economic) is considerable, it is lopsided.

### **Uneven Educational Opportunities**

The villages had government schools and public schools. The latter were doubted for their recognition status. The NGO runs two types of NFE centres— literacy for adult women and for children from 5 to 14 years of age. A survey of NFE centres revealed that women from both the communities joined the literacy camp. In most of the villages, it was successful.

However, centres for children had children from one community only. Within the community there was stratification, with mainly the children of the petty farmers or craftsmen attending. It seemed that there was streamlining of who went to which school. Absence of one community, the

economically well off people, indicated that they went either to government schools or to private schools if at all they went to school.

Within the community there was uneven access to education. In some cases the stratification was evident in the housing pattern, in cases where both the communities resided in the same village. The village was first divided community wise. Educated people thronged the approach area of the *mohalla*. As one moved further there were hawkers and butchers. This part was hardly visited by any ANM (auxiliary nurse and midwife) for regular vaccination. The



NGO offered to start centres for these areas. There was another remote part, the *harijan basti*, whose children and women were denied entry by these localities (whom the NGO approached).

The social worker told me that these areas have been declared as 100 per cent literate by the government. But the situation is far removed in reality. People were keen on education,

especially the women and children, who hardly moved out from this area. During the afternoon, there were hardly any men and just a few young men. Localities reported that though people came to start a centre for education, nobody continued or sustained. They demanded assurances and most of them were ready to pay<sup>1</sup> too.

Interestingly, at all the centres both boys and girls came but only a few boys according to reports, continued the education in mainstream schools.

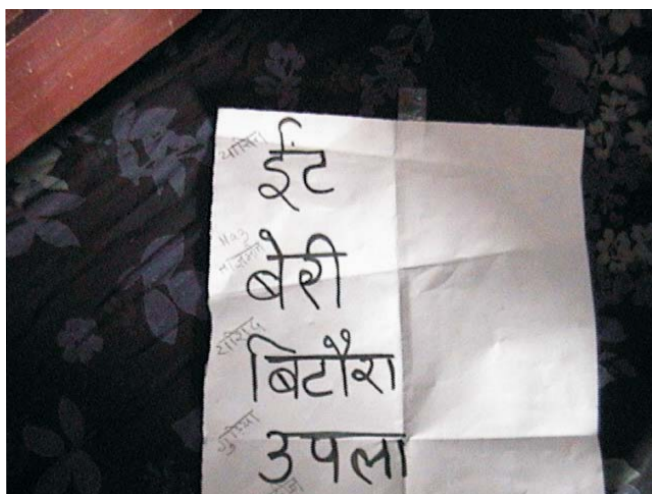
### **Educational Experience**

The community mobilised effort had a strong impact on the initiation of the centre, in the above-mentioned area,

which came from a person from the same community. The need was put forth to the social worker in a SHG (Self Help Group). His presence helped to gain the trust of the people. They were willing to talk to us and by the time I finished my placement, the NGO was preparing to start four new centres<sup>2</sup> in the locality! The general population also stated a need for someone who could teach them.

Everyone, even in other villages, unanimously felt the keenness for education. The *sarpanch*, teacher or a local villager showed interest in starting the center and offered space. They maintained access<sup>3</sup> and presence of students and teachers. The teacher was either from the same village or from a nearby one. Interestingly, all the teachers were from different communities and showed a willingness to teach minorities.

The teacher's background, according to me, was critical to the functioning of the centres. She was one of them, even if in most of the cases she belonged to another community. These teachers, unlike their urban counterparts, did not make fun of child's use of a local language,



<sup>1</sup> A token amount decided by an NGO for books, notebooks, chalk, blackboard. The salary of the teacher was managed by the NGO. In most cases parents did not give money consistently.

<sup>2</sup> Number of students in each centre either for adult women or children was 25. In this case they reported having 50 women and children from the same locality.

<sup>3</sup> Commuting was a problem in village areas. There was no consistent means of transport. Married women and in a few cases even adolescent girls were stopped from using bicycles, which further curtailed their movements.

appearance, and frequent absence<sup>4</sup> from the centre. Therefore, I believe that these teachers had potential to include the local milieu (language and culture) in the curriculum to make learning more meaningful. In an exercise we decided that children would choose words they wanted to write. The use of the words 'Eeint', 'Beri', 'Bitora', 'Upla', left the teachers surprised but not offended. I requested them to introduce the words (their own names, their parents' name or anything they liked) in the class.

Since the teacher was friendly, the children accepted my presence happily along with the social worker who visited them often. In this case, making a bond with the children, doing activities with them was easier than it was in an urban corporation school. However, it was not that the teacher did not hit or rebuke them—she was accepted as an extension of their elders at home.

As a researcher, giving an opinion on the centre's functioning and as a teacher participating in teaching and learning, the overall experience was very satisfying, enriching, and challenging. It offered the potential to learn and apply more than that offered by an urban public or corporation school in Delhi.



### Post Centre

The transition from the NFE centres' concepts in education to mainstream schooling was not that smooth. I believe students required scaffolds for continuing education. In this case, even qualified teachers need training. In case of a village it was eight years since a teacher was running the centre. But the agency still could not find a better counterpart. It was evident that 'what after the centre' was a question that even the literacy centre faced. There were no means of 'continuing literacy', 'post literacy', and remedial classes that students required, after NFE centers.

Mostly, villagers agreed on the need for education but there were a range of responses. A group of women who were economically satiated were reluctant to acknowledge the need for literacy in their life. Another group of

<sup>4</sup> When we went to the village, villagers were busy harvesting rice. So the teacher and students were frequently absent from the center.

women wanted to read the *Ramayana* so they were keen to acquire literacy skills. There was another who believed literacy would fetch them some work and that they would be well off. I had no argument to convince any of them and felt clueless about the use of literacy in their life. I did not feel like convincing them when they felt it was of no use to them. I felt the need for a community-mobilised use of literacy and education—where new uses could be added (apart from reading the name of the destination on a bus that hardly comes to a village!). For example in the same village, the young adolescent girls told me it is

important to read and write. One of the uses they mentioned was to ‘dial a telephone number’.

In another village, women shared their views on news items in the Hindi newspapers. It was enriching for me to know their opinion and satisfying for the women to use their literacy skills.

Some women after acquiring literacy skills opened bank accounts, and made SHGs to avail loans. Literacy stood clueless, in isolation from their community needs and so did the curriculum content. But the potential is immense, waiting to be tapped.