

HUNAR

A Community Based Skill Development Project for Muslim Girls

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Education, as a prime mover in facilitating social and economic development, is now well understood by all and needs no further emphasis. It is well understood that it not only enhances productivity (through improvement in educational and skill base) thereby leading to economic empowerment but also augments democratic participation of all minorities/marginalized sections of society and upgrades their access to health and other quality of life indicators. Therefore, the aspect of equity and social justice is inextricably interwoven with the issue of expansion of educational access, more so in complex, pluralistic, democratic societies like India that are undergoing a phase of rapid economic development. The issue of equity and social justice, if not addressed correctly, by a well thought of and decisive set of policy interventions, can lead to a further widening of already existing gaps in between different Socio-Religious Communities (SRC) and aggravate their feeling of alienation.

In order to provide directions and address relevant issues related to social, economic and educational status of Muslim Community as an SRC, the Government of India, had set up a committee called Sachar Committee to identify possible areas of intervention. The Committee concluded that the Muslim Community had experienced educational deprivation, both in absolute and relative terms and more importantly, the community felt discriminated against and was getting increasingly marginalized (consequently alienated). It substantiated its findings by gathering statistical data to show lower overall literacy rates for Muslims (59.1 % as against 65.1% - national average) for growth rate of literacy across different SRCs, in terms of Mean Years of Schooling (MYS), enrolment rates, attendance rates, differentials in educational attainments of different SRCs, dropout rates and Matriculation Completion Rates (MCRs). It came to the conclusion that Muslims as SRC, have one of the lowest enrollment rates at school level and within Muslims, it is the girl child who is most vulnerable. It further concluded that 'Elementary Education' was the biggest stumbling block, which hindered their access to higher/technical education, thereby restricting their employment and income generating potential. Therefore, the immediate interventions required to be made by the state were (a) in the field of elementary education (b) through promotion of Urdu medium schools in the immediate neighborhood (c) integrating traditional educational institutions like Madarsas/Maktabs into the mainstream of education providers (d) imparting appropriate skill/vocational based training at elementary/secondary level to Muslim girls and boys.

The findings and recommendations of Sachar Committee Report formed the backdrop for the assessment of a unique, innovative and hitherto untried idea for devising an 'intervention strategy' for reaching the most difficult target group, i.e., young Muslim girls in India. Young Muslim girls, as educationally deprived group, face maximum barriers in accessing education, due to the socio-religious constraints, which becomes more difficult, with economic deprivations. The past experience of almost '6' decades of public policy in educational domain has shown that a uniform or generalized kind of policy has not made any relative difference to their educational attainments – they continue to remain at the bottom of educational ladder.

PROJECT HUNAR – REACHING THE YOUNG MUSLIM GIRL

Project Hunar was initiated keeping in mind the unique existential problems of the young Muslim girls. It was collaboration in between Government of India, National Institute of Open Schooling and Govt. of Bihar through Bihar Education Project Council (BEPC). Hunar was aimed at providing free, skill based training to poor, Muslim girls (11-14/16 years) **mostly out of school**.

The project covered all '38' districts of Bihar, including most of its Educationally Backward Blocks. The total project cost was **Rs. 25.5 millions** paid by BEPC on the basis of intervention No. 20, under Norms for Intervention, under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the National Flagship Literacy Program of GoI, for which BEPC is the state level implementation Agency. NIOS was the agency to plan and execute "Project Hunar" on pilot basis in Bihar – during July 2008 to July 2009, by developing course material in Hindi & Urdu, for seven selected courses, having competencies of Class V & VIII Level i.e., B & C Levels of Open Basic Education Program of NIOS. These courses were Cutting – Tailoring & Dress Making; Bakery & Confectionary; Beauty Culture; Early Childhood Care; Jute Production; Basic Rural Technology; Gram Sakhi. A total of 13,768 were enrolled in Hunar in the first phase.

Implementation Strategy

On the face of it "Project Hunar" appears to be one of the many government interventions in the field of skill development, but it is the implementation strategy which sets it apart as a path breaking, innovative and land mark project, for providing doorstep educational access, in a secure, supportive and enabling environment by channelizing educational delivery of Open Basic Education(OBE) of Open Learning System(OLS) through the existing channels of community/faith institutions of Muslims like Madarsas/Makhtabs, and Traditional Educational Institutions of Muslims, which incidentally , also breaks the 'disconnect' in between modern/(secular) & traditional educational institutions. SCR, has emphasized the importance of providing primary/elementary education in mother tongue through schools in immediate neighborhood of Muslims girls – to reduce the distance in between the child and school. This has been achieved by substituting neighborhood schools (till such time, they are made available by the State) by Madarsas, Makhtabs and other traditional educational institutions of Muslims, on the basis of their widespread acceptance by the girl child, her family, local community & religious leaders, as centers for imparting primary education & skill based training to them, obviating the need for them to venture out of safety of their own immediate neighborhood. This novel concept of educational delivery had been blocked till now, by the institutional barrier, erected by most of the Open Distance Learning Systems (ODLs) as well as Formal School System in India – namely of granting accreditation, as their study centre, only to those educational institutions, which are in turn recognized/affiliated by some or other Educational Board/Regulatory Board/Government Organization and also fulfils their minimum eligibility conditions in terms of resources. This effectively blocked all Madarsas/Makhtabs & other faith based institutions which are normally out of the desired ambit by ODLs as well as formal educational sector in India – being one of the most important reasons for 'disconnect' in between traditional & modern educational institutions and isolation of the former. This was especially rectified by getting a fundamental change in Policy of granting accreditation to the institutions, by ODLs like NIOS through intervention by GoI. This opened the way for harnessing the energies and community linkages of these traditional organizations, by granting them accreditation as study centers for Open Basic Education/Skill Based training centers of NIOS, thereby opening an innovative pathway for reaching poor, young, mostly out of school, Muslim girls in Bihar. Though the size of the target group was not very large, but it was almost uniformly dispersed over entire Bihar, where the existing network of study centers of NIOS was almost non-existent. Topography, economic conditions of the target group, lack of access to any other physical structures for granting access, socio-religious barriers , made access even more difficult – all of which ,also provided practical reasons, for adopting the "Community based approach" for delivery of the Project.

To begin with, '3' prominent socio-religious and educational organizations of Muslims, having state level (& even national level) presence, amongst the community were identified as major stakeholders. These were, Imarat-e-Sharia, Edar-e-sharia and Rahmani Foundation, who have been operating for a long time in the field of social work including education, apart from being seats of prominent religious groupings of Muslims in Bihar, Jharkhand & Orissa. They enjoy high reputation as NGOs and command immense respect & religious followings covering overwhelming Muslim population of the State.

They were involved in discussions, after they were convinced that NIOS- OBE Programmes were 'non-obtrusive' and non-mandatory educational interventions, which will be implemented by them, through their own traditional educational organizations/faith organizations, without interfering or altering in any way, their traditional structure and functioning . In fact, these 'Nodal Agencies' would have primary say in the method, mode and manner of delivery of these educational interventions, taking into account their socio-religious sensitivities, practical considerations & essential character. Once Nodal Agencies were convinced and sensitized about the desirability of the "Project" as well as the importance of establishing "this innovative delivery mechanism", their support and enthusiasm, ensured the massive participation at grass root level also. Based upon their ideas, inputs and suggestions, a tripartite framework was developed, in which first party was BEPC, which collected and provided Admission forms, from all districts and paid the entire fee for all seven courses of NIOS. Second party was NIOS, which was to provide, academic and technical support, provide tailor made course materials, identify and establish a chain of its study centers all over Bihar for the project, control and guide teaching-learning under the project, monitor it and then conduct evaluation to grant certificate at the end of the Project. Third party was the Nodal Agencies and their Madarasas/Maktabs and other educational institutions, controlled or linked to them, present in E.B Blocks of all '38' districts of Bihar. All such centers were identified after extensive discussions, and inspections with the help of the Nodal Agencies, BEPC and local authorities, by NIOS and granted accreditation as its study centers for Project Hunar. It was a massive work undertaken at war footing, which led to granting accreditation to almost 300 Madarasas/Maktabs and other traditional educational institutions of Muslims, in a span of less than 100 days, thereby creating a unique, grass root level network, accessing, target group at their door step.. The norms for their functioning, timings, use of available resources and acquired resources (from Project Fund) was evolved on the basis of consensus amongst all '3' Collaborators. An MOU was signed amongst all '3' Parties, Outlining the duties and responsibilities of each one of them. All the beneficiary girls were allocated and admitted to the study centers nearest to their homes.

As per the norms of NIOS 20% of the total fee was retained by NIOS and the remaining 80% of the total fees, of all 13768 girls, paid by BEPC to NIOS, was in turn, released to all study centers, through their respective Nodal Agencies in '3'a installments. First installment of 50%, of 80% of the fee was released to the Nodal Agencies, as mobilization advance. Elaborate financial regulatory mechanism was created for ensuring smooth flow of funds, its proper utilization, monitoring and Audit by both GoB and GoI. It was mandatory to make all transactions through especially opened Bank accounts of Nodal Agencies and their respective study centers,. It was used to procure only equipment, raw materials and other essential items, to impart skill based training to these girls, and make payment by cheques to the teachers and master trainers. All other kinds of expenditure, outside above mentioned ones, was not permissible. It ensured that this program had to be essentially supported by the local community and concerned Nodal Agency, for covering other expenses, not covered by Project Funds, by allowing use of their physical infrastructure, all other facilities and resources. In many cases, even teacher and trainers gave their services on voluntary basis. It ensured that community acquired the ownership and the responsibility of this highly decentralized project

The teaching/training hours were fixed for each course but complete freedom was given to Nodal Agencies and their study centers to fix days, timings and even the batch sizes of the girls, to undergo training in one session. Similarly, in case of master – trainer was not a diploma holder, as per norms of NIOS, or even if he was an illiterate, then theory portion could be taken by a regular teacher, with only hands on training being imparted by the master trainer, under the supervision of local community. These flexibilities were evolved after consensus and feedback from Coordinators of the study centers who were actually running the project.

Joint inspection teams of NIOS & BEPC ensured that class room transactions of required course duration was duly undertaken with proper records of attendance of girls for both theory and practical classes as well as that of teachers and trainers ,being maintained as per Performa prescribed by NIOS. Proper Admission registers, distribution of admit cards, timely distribution of

study materials, Tutor Marked Assignments and mid term tests – were ensured as per norms laid down by NIOS. '3' Orientation of Courses for coordinators of study centers and office bears of Nodal Agencies, NIOS and BEPC were conducted to explain to them, the innovative implementation framework, duties and responsibilities of each functionary and also evolve consensus on various aspects of this unique pilot project, as it was a learning experience, for all those who were involved in this Project.

Quality Assurance

Under "Hunar", quality was ensured as it became an increasingly community based project, with least role assigned to government agencies, in its day to day implementation. It ensured not only prevention of pilferages/leakages but also ensured 100% attendance, 'Zero' drop out rate and full community support to bridge the resource gap in terms of physical resources and human resources, as the funds given to study centers were meager for first time creation of training facilities for many courses of NIOS. Govt of India(Gol) allotted the work of third party impact assessment of Project to Pandit Sunderlal Sharma, Central Institute of Vocational Education (PSSCIVE), Bhopal, a Government of India institution, in the field of vocational education. It was based upon process indicators and norms fixed *apriori*, both in qualitative and quantitative terms, such as bank account and transaction details, maintenance of attendance registers, enrollment and retention of girls, stock registers etc.

Educational concerns for minorities, and in particular for girls and women within them, has been an over-riding objective of the Education Policy in India, but it was brought into sharper focus recently, after findings of Sachar Committee were accepted by Gol. It was for educationist and educational administrators, to harness State's commitment, policies and resources for this objective. Administrative acumen, organizing capacity and insight into the socio-religious dynamics of Muslim Community, with commitment to 'inclusive education' led to harnessing of state's already existing policy commitment and resources for this target group

To conceive Project Hunar, no new scheme was required nor were any new sanctions required for funding of the project. It was a good example of collaboration in between central and state governments (*even with different and opposing political parties in power*) (b) Since Project Hunar addressed the direct and felt need of target group, administrators of this project were also able to bring about a dramatic change within a short timeframe in the legal and institutional framework of ODL i.e., NIOS with the approval of government of India, was able to relax its norms for granting accreditation to traditional educational institutions of educationally backward minorities like Muslims. (c) This in turn allowed administrators and architects of 'Project Hunar' to weave an intricate, complex, and vast network of Madarasas/Maktabs and traditional educational institutions of Muslims as accredited study centers of NIOS, in almost all Educationally Backward Blocks (EBBs) of all districts of Bihar, which was a never available in Bihar, or in any other state in the country. It became possible to make them a medium for delivery of governmental educational input, which in turn had a cascading beneficial effect from the point of view of the community. It removed the disconnect in between modern and traditional educational institutions of Muslims thereby ending their isolation and to some extent alienation from the outside world. This was primarily because of inclusive and non-obtrusive characteristic of the educational Programmes offered through OLS under Hunar. Since OLS did not interfere with their traditional structure and function but at the same time allowed them to take up an additional role of educational provider in distance mode, Madarasas and Maktabs were able to integrate and fuse their functions of Deeni Taleem (Theological Learning) with Duniyavi Taleem (Learning of Modern subjects) which is the need of the hour in today's age of knowledge society. This also led to exposing several erroneous myths and perceptions about the role and motivation of Madarasas/Maktabs in the eyes of outsiders.

Another beneficial impact of Project Hunar was crystallization of total involvement and commitment of the community from the grass root level, to its topmost socio-religious & educational leaders. The project successfully created mass educational awareness amongst the poorer sections. There was a huge demand from all those, who were left out of Pilot phase of this

project. As a result, upon the successful conclusion of pilot phase, Government of Bihar announced that Hunar Phase – II (2009-10) would be upscaled to extend it to 50,000 girls – 25000 from Muslim community and remaining 25000 from SC/ST and EBC communities in Bihar. Due to changes in organizational structures, both at central and state government level, the project got delayed and phase II of Hunar was shifted to 2010-11.

The biggest achievement of the Project Hunar – as was aptly noted by the program evaluating agency. PSSCIVE - was the tremendous enthusiasm shown not only by the girls, but also by their family and immediate neighborhood. The beneficiaries had a concrete sense of achievement and empowerment, when they were certified by NIOS, in a public exam and granted certificates on their successful completion. Their success stories got wide publicity and coverage in both national and local media as they were able to show their subsequent placement in jobs or self employment or even going back to the formal schools from which they had dropped out.

The spin off of the project was that all successful girls in Hunar Phase – I (2008-09), who received NIOS certificate, were given one time cash assistance of Rs. 2500/- per girl child, by Government of Bihar, under its own project known as “Auzar”, which was meant to consolidate the gains made under Project Hunar. Out of 13768 girls, 11213 appeared for public examination conducted by NIOS in June-July 2009 – 10134 girls passed the exams and received certificates and 1079 girls could not pass. Similarly, girls who had excelled during skill training program under project Hunar Phase – I, were to be given work of teachers/instructors under Phase – II. Hence, success of the pilot project ensured further progress both in terms of new projects and new pathways for empowerment of this focus group.

If Project Hunar can be executed successfully in one of the poorest states of the country, then it can be done successfully in rest of the country and other parts of the Muslim world also.