

"My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can loose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is battle for freedom. It is the battle of reclamation of human personality". Dr B. R. Ambedkar

JMS Perspectives on Education – Looking Ahead into the future

Introduction

Raichur district, known as the rice bowl of Karnataka, has a long and checkered history. Over the centuries, it has been part of the empires of Vijayanagar, the Adil Shahs of Bijapur, the Marathas, the Nizam of Hyderabad, and latter part of the reign of Mysore has seen being neglected politically and economically. Raichur is predominantly known for its dry and harsh climactic conditions. Five taluks that is Devdurga, Lingsugur, Sindhanur, Raichur and Manvi formed the district of Raichur with an area of 5559 square kms and a population of 13, 51, 809(Hand book of Karnataka 2001 pg 83)

The district of Raichur falls in the Deccan plateau has predominantly black cotton soil and agriculture is the primary basis of production and employment. . The major parts of the district are dry lands. Rains are scanty, 602 mm being the district average. The Government of India classifies the district as hot, dry, semi-arid area. A dry climate and an extremely hot summer, lasting from mid February to early June, characterize the district. regional disparities in human index withother parts of karnataka is blatantly seen.

Social Scenario

- Social system highly stratified- visible forms of untouchability highly prevalent, characterized by no entry into public places like hotels, temples etc. Discrimination at sources for water like taps, borewells. The Dalit communities in Raichur consisting of 17.25% of the district population.
- Lack of basic necessities like shelter, electricity.

Lack of adequate education facilities and high rates of drop outs, illiterates etc. **Literacy Rate¹**: Total for Raichur District is 35.96%, while for Karnataka it is 56.04%

District	Female Literacy	Female Literacy within the SC Communities
Raichur:	22.15 %	10.61%
Gulbarga:	24.49%	12.80%

- Health facilities are wholly inadequate, exorbitant charges, increase reported in diseases like TB, gastroenteritis, stomach ulcers, skin disorders, gynecological disorders, deaths due to AIDS. Malnutrition and anemia rampant among almost all women.

Within this, the condition of SC/ST communities is horrible and degrading to their existence as humans.

Economic Scenario (special focus on agricultural sector)

Agricultural labourers 47.6% and Landless 31.6%

¹ All indicators for 1991 Karnataka Development Report 1999

- Large communities of landless/marginal farmers increasingly feel themselves being wiped out of the mainstream process of participation in the local and national economy.
- Agriculture sector is facing a complete collapse with traders and middlemen expanding at the expense of farmers.
- The agriculture scenario is characterized by low returns, rising prices of inputs/ spurious inputs, high rate of interest for private credit, unavailability of credit, erratic water and rains, high incidence of pest and pesticide use and reducing yields.
- The agricultural labourers are caught in the web of poverty and despair for survival, increasing shortage of work, real time decrease in wages, large scale migrations in search of employment, rampant poverty, foods needs unmet.

Rise in the cost of essentials, inequality in land conditions and lack of political will to deal with the land question.

Political Scenario (of dalit communities)

- Ineffective community leadership, because representation in local governance bodies subdued and overshadowed by the presence and rule of upper castes.
- Struggles against untouchability and processes for political emancipation fragmented. Fragmentation in ranks of Dalit group and general lack of credibility for Dalit sangha groups within local communities.
- There is a general disenchantment with 'token struggle politics'.
- Questions of women marginalized, issues of violence rape, questions of equal rights and wages, questions of property and unequal division of labour silenced.
- Women seen as easy groups to be mobilized for SHGs and savings activities. Women's groups have become co-opted, a cheap source for rallies and committees. Facilitating the withdrawal of the government from essential services.

Emergence and consolidation of caste based groups another feature. The main focus is to corner the share of proportional benefits and work on issues the particular castes are concerned with. Such caste based caucuses in effect strangle the movements of people cutting against caste boundaries.

The Government

- The withdrawal of the govt. from the social sector particularly in the field of education is happening in a planned and meticulous way creating a disastrous and volatile situation in the rural sector.

We feel that the future of agricultural communities is nearing desperation, coupled with that the conditions of landless agricultural labourers is extremely weak

It is within this context that the **Jagrutha Mahila Sanghatan** needs to position its wider vision of the work it needs to carry out at this juncture. What is given below is details culled out from various discussions with the women on the question of **Education**.

You know that our work with dalit women who are primarily agricultural labourers in the district of Raichur is now more than 5 years old. The longing for the school has time and again been put forward by the women and men who feel that their children need a different future from theirs. Our response has to always tell them to work with the public system and to improve the quality of

education there and hence we have members in the School development committees and so on. We have worked in ensuring that the mid day meal scheme was happening in all villages. We have urged people to enroll their children in schools. We had also initiated some scholarships /educational material support for children then. We had taken up the responsibility of running a school for child labourers within the community as we felt that a whole generation of very poor young children's lives were being wasted away searching for livelihoods.

Education For Social Transformation

During the last three years we ourselves have gone through and experienced a sea change in the way things are happening on the ground here. Today we feel that in the midst of the crumbling down of the social infrastructure in rural areas and the increasing commercialization of education our children stand no chance of being truly educated and truly learned if there is not a conscious and systematic effort to follow up on each child throughout his young age as pitfalls and institutional structures and social systems are effective in cutting down their journey to be liberated.

Within the team we find ourselves loaded with work and doubtful whether we have enough commitment and perseverance to see it through, so we have been involved in discussions at various places and levels of our work here with the people and also concerned friends outside about the viability of such a school and whether it is actually a wise thing to do it. But everybody we talk to, while asking questions puts forward intelligent suggestions and feels charged and motivated to pitch in their time and effort for the school. In fact women who work here are keenly involved in the discussions and constantly prompting us about the necessity and how it would be a blessing for the "badavaru" (poor) they are constantly telling horror stories of how difficult it has become to educate their children and also how they feel about discriminations at every space. We have had men come here and tell us how they would contribute free labour to work in putting up the foundations for the school and children who have said to their mothers that they would like to study in the **Sanghatan** school. Essentially that is what it has come to symbolize, a school which is being birthed by the sweat, tears and aspirations of dalit women agricultural labourers who are so convinced that their children need a different future.

Hence after a lot of discussions with the community and also hearing peoples dreams of how things should be Some concerns and ideas have come out. Whatever we build should become a place of learning which will transform our whole work. The school would be centered around the community with active participation, power to invest and make decisions about how the school should be would rest with the **Sanghatan**. Essentially it would be owned by the **Sanghatan** /community.

Seeking Education - The Sanghatan School and Beyond

The quest is not for running a model school but educating the whole generation of students and following them up in the later stages of their education through scholarships and support services for them to reach their professional level, what it means is that we hope that once a child is admitted to our school then we accompany the child for the next 12 years and help realize the child's potential in whatever field she may want to be in. Our direct involvement with the children would be from the ages of 10-17 and then close monitoring follow up and support for future needs would be arranged for appropriately. All this means a lot of investment in terms of money time, effort and vision, but increasingly we find that the increasing commercialization of education and piecemeal approaches have only left this community helpless. The older generation of young people most often first generation of educated are left hanging and many are bitter about life. Beyond a point the impact of being literate and 7th pass has been negligible. Now is a time that a whole generation needs to be invested in upon so that the next would follow them. In that

sense ours is not to be an alternate school hoping to work out a model of running the school but a place where children are educated in numbers yet with the care and attention given to the creative growth of each child.

The socio- economic condition and the status of education in the district would make what we are saying amply clear

"Freedom of mind is the real freedom. A person whose mind is not free though he may not be in chains, is a slave, not a free man. One whose mind is not free, though he may not be in prison, is a prisoner and not a free man. One whose mind is not free though alive, is no better than dead. Freedom of mind is the proof of one's existence."
Dr B. R. Ambedkar

Children and learning

We dream of a space where children are given the best of education which creates a sense of dignity, identity and confidence, make the child able to understand the history of their struggles to unpack casteism and patriarchy and the feeling of lesser humanness, we seek to create a sense of community among students and students who want to give back to the community Where the value of working on the land and labour is instilled , where academics go beyond rote and move towards creating children ready to face the world armed with knowledge and sensitivity to the poor. It needs to be done in a different environment and space, a different nurturing organic to their lives...

The school should open its eyes to the sound of music and the rhythms of dance, our children who have been needlessly put through the hardships of life have music in their veins, they who have listened to nature , heard lullabies sung by their mothers in the cradle, songs in the fields, Our children who have seen their fathers make drums from leather and beaten it to strange and intoxicating rhythms have music and arts in their blood. Hence music, arts ,dance and drama would be central to the existence of the school. There are members in the team who feel that the center of the school should be space for performances (a stage)

We hope to pick up children who have finished their fourth standard or put through a bridge school children who have dropped out and admit them in the 5th standard . For the purpose of working with government regulations we hope to send children to other schools in Potnal for their regular classes (5th, 6th and 7th) and admit them into our school from the 8th standard (high school recognized by the GOK). We have friends who have agreed to work on getting the govt. recognition for it.

As for academics the school would follow the state syllabus to some extent so that the children are well equipped to write the 10th std examinations and proceed beyond that, but we hope to weave around a whole new curriculum. There is a wealth of experience we have managed to acquire with the running of the *Chilipili shale* for the last 5 years for child labourers wherein a whole range of teaching methodology has been used predominantly the methodology of Paulo Friere. The twin principles on which teaching in our child labour school was based were- to instill in children creative expression and a questioning seeking mind. Teaching material and content was developed keeping in mind that these children are bright and have already had rich life experiences, they have language skills and tremendous knowledge of the natural environment in a real sense. Therefore in every subject teachers tried to start with what they know and the effort was to explain concepts through their own life contexts. Education was seen as a tool and means in the process of empowerment and therefore would have to be structured different from the mainstream system which mirrors social inequalities and does not take away from the children of Dalit communities a sense of being lesser. Another aspect we learnt from the Chilipili experience is that it was difficult often for children to continue once they had been shifted to the Regular government school. Reasons were many- economic obstacles lack of hostels, discrimination and an environment which did not offer spaces for their creativity which did not challenge them to

explore and which did not nurture. They were back to spaces of neglect and beating and often ran back from their hostels to their villages. Therefore we feel that a bridge course is not enough and there is a need for a slightly longer term support.

Teachers and training

For the Sangathan school that we envision the place and growth of teachers is central. The process would seek to bring out teachers from within the community as well. Training and opportunities for the teachers to embark on a different journey is a basic need that the process would involve. The teachers we feel need to unlearn what all the conventional system has taught them and work hard to create a curriculum fit to the needs of the community. We hope that a 6 months journey could be taken by the teachers visiting and being in various different schools and that they are able to evolve the curriculum looking at what is happening all around in schools that have become examples of our dream.

With regard to taking responsibility of running the school, **Mita** we are hoping is coming back, There is **Seema** who has been involved in running a "Freedom School" for Afro American community in the US, we have **Subash** who is the head master of the Chilipili shale and two other teachers who have run the *Chilipili* School. **Prem** will actively pitch in. We have **Dr Bhagyalaxmi** (president of our Trust) and **Dr Umesh** our friends in SAKHI who are rooted in their quest for meaningful education.

We have friends in AID who have always been highly supportive and persistent in their work with us. We have already sounded to **Archana** (our contact in AID) and am sure that they would help with their experience of running educational programmes and be able to raise a part of the resource for us and also We also have other groups/ agencies who are interested in supporting different aspects of the project

We also have a whole range of friends who would be more than willing to chip in all the aspects for the school. However as with all our other work we believe it is important to train and equip young people from within the community itself to take responsibility for the running of the school in the long run Our dream is to run a fully free residential school where the criteria of money does not come in the way of any child from the community being educated except by way of contributions from parents as grains or labour. The rest we hope to raise from outside for the initial capital investments and some continued support for children.

Space and setting

The space for the school would be predominantly an agricultural setting near a village and the Potnal stream. We do not envisage big buildings but more compact and dispersed buildings considering the different ages of children. The use of materials is very important and we feel the need of using as little as cement and concrete as possible. However the harsh summer, the cold winter and the strong rainy season all have to be looked into while looking at the comfort of children. Apart from the usual requirements of classrooms/spaces, libraries, dining places kitchen, labs etc there needs to be areas for sports and exercises, for garden, for growing of a nursery and plantation of trees etc have to be taken care of. We hope that we are able to acquire some agricultural land nearby so that in future the school will be sustainable enough to run on its own for daily needs of food. We have a person willing to sell about three acres of land near the village of **Bannignur** in **Sindhanur Taluka** about 2 kms. from Potnal The price may come to about **6 lakhs** including registration and so on.

For construction bamboo, is an option preferred but we can also look at other materials. The school would have about 200-250 children from the ages of 10-17 with teachers and others staying within the campus hence we need living spaces for all of them constructed Cost as usual

is a big concern for us as the maintenance and running of the school is envisaged differently. We have had discussions already with **Prasad** an young architect friend of ours and who is inclined in towards aesthetics of local materials, use of materials like bamboo and ecologically friendly techniques for constructions

Conclusion

In short what are we trying to achieve is nothing short of a radical transformation, a socio economic reversal of the status of agricultural laborers communities in the next generation. We need to see a generation of confident, free and sensitive young people who are not afraid to challenge the unjust norms existing, creative enough to face life strongly and sensitive enough to build new communities. This might sound like a huge dream , but increasingly we find that we as a group working on the grassroots are left with no options of working towards real transformation. Increasingly it is becoming clear in front of our eyes that the generation of women with whom we are partners in this work would be lucky if they are to survive the conditions of increasing hardships heaped upon them day by day. We feel that the future of agricultural communities are nearing death and desperation, coupled with that the conditions of landless agricultural labourers is extremely weak. Hence in the Sanghatan we are speaking of resisting injustices and indignity in our personal and community lives, look out for new ways to create a living, newer ways of livelihood and working towards creating a space for the transformation of the communities in the next generation. Hence in one sense the generation who has organized will not enjoy the benefits of their work but only hope that their children's lives are better.