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Project Mala weaves a new fabric of life

Project Mala is working to educate children from impoverished weaver families

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Students at a Project Mala School at Guria in Varanasi

Meet Nagendra. He wakes up before dawn and runs to the village hand pump to get drinking water for his house and cattle. Then he works on his family's tiny farm. By 9 am, when it's time for school, he has already worked for several hours. After school, he usually helps his father in his tyre repair shop for some time. Usually, all he has time for when he reaches home is dinner and bed.

Nagendra is one of the 1,200 children in six Project Mala schools spread across the heart of India's carpet-weaving belt in Mirzapur and Varanasi. Bogged down by the unholy triad of poverty, underdevelopment and illiteracy, he and others like him had no option but to drop out of school and join the workforce, until one day someone decided to offer these rural children quality schooling as an alternative to becoming illegal underage workers. That person was Robin Garland, then the UK-based chief executive of one of the largest carpet manufacturers in the area, E Hill and Company. The year was 1986 and the world was just waking up to the injustice of child labour.

"Initially, Project Mala schools were a means of empowering rehabilitated child workers," says Anil Sahu, finance & administrative officer of The Children Emancipation Society which runs these schools. "The government had simply banned child labour in 1986, leaving these children bereft of any viable livelihood." Today, with greater awareness, most parents in the carpet belt prefer sending their children

to school than to work. However, the poor quality of government schools in the area has created a burgeoning class of what Project Mala staffers call "educated yet unemployable youths".

"Therefore, we're now focusing on providing children of poor weaving families with the best education possible. We take care of their fees, uniforms, books, diet, medical assessments and even transportation," says Sahu. Over the years, the society has established one secondary, two middle and six primary Project Mala schools in the Mirzapur and Varanasi districts.

The impact has been path-breaking. Every year, Project Mala students record over 90 per cent attendance and while the neighbouring government schools have abysmal dropout rates, not more than six to seven students of Project Mala leave school annually. Compared to government schools where teacher absenteeism is the norm, the staff at Project Mala devises interesting projects to supplement their curriculum. Consequently, when these schools take new admissions, they receive over 2,000 applications for 300 seats. And in an area where girls used to be married at 12, people in remote villages have started sending their daughters to the Project Mala hostel to study.

It has been tough on many counts. "With first-generation learners, we ensure that all their study is done in school because they have no home backup," Sahu says. Like Nagendra, many students work at home or in the fields before coming, often exhausted, to school. "Usually, the winter crop is harvested around exam time. They harvest their crop, then come to take their exams," says Sahu. Over the years, Sahu and his team have also worked to modify regressive social mores. "When I joined in 2003, we had three married girls in Class V, including a 17-year-old widow with two children. Today, none of our girls is married."

Having lived in the area for many years, I've long been familiar with Project Mala's work. This time, I decide to visit their oldest school in Guria, halfway on the Sher Shah Suri Marg between Allahabad and Varanasi. On entering, I hear subdued sounds of chattering as the children have their morning snack of boiled chickpea. Later, I observe them work on a team-based project on water conservation. "We've asked them to collect field data on water usage around their homes and identify points of wastage," explains Mukesh Dubey, education officer at Project Mala. "We try to make schooling as relevant as possible to their lives." Secondary school students have to seek admission in other schools, but feel free to return to Project Mala for tuitions and counselling. Many make it to prestigious senior schools and polytechnics. Project Mala is now in demand even among children from higher socio-economic backgrounds, for the gaps it fills in the government education system are enormous. "The fact is that we'd be out of business if government schools did their jobs," says Sahu.

Over 8,200 students from some of India's most backward areas have passed out of Project Mala in the last 25 years. In an independent field study of the Project Mala School in Turkahan in 2008, a remote and underdeveloped tribal area, Mondira Dutta of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, notes, "Even if a total of 30 children pass out every year from here, it will be a huge boon to the tribal people completely cut off from the world. The impact would no doubt be a rippling one covering a wide area."

The awarding of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize to Kailash Satyarthi and Malala Yousufzai showcases the shifting international focus on children's rights and education. However, small organisations like Project Mala have, in their own quiet way, also made a significant impact at ground level.

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