

# *Liberate school*

## **An Exploration into Alternate Learning Spaces**



### **Learning from Experiences - Series I**

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## Preface

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## Section 1

# Introduction

In India, 200 million children of age below 14 are enrolled in schools. Yet, there are another at least 100 million children who are either completely out of school or have dropped out before completion of grade five.

If one were to look at continuation of children in schooling system, the situation is far from satisfactory, with over 41 percent of those enrolled drop out before completion of primary schooling. Irregularity in attendance, non completion and repetition of grades is a common phenomenon in rural areas where in children discontinues education for host of reasons, including “not interested in going to school”. In fact the PROBE survey of 1999, has identified over 20 per cent of the children who dropped out of school have mentioned that the schooling is not interesting to them. The effective attendance rate is 62% for boys and 49% for girls. While the focus has so far been on getting the children into schools, there is hardly any effort to strengthen the in-school processes and make them more qualitatively attractive for children and make children learn. Even if one were to take the achievement levels, they are abysmally low across the country both in rural and urban areas. Most children of primary grade do not have competencies in basics like reading, writing and arithmetic. ASER reports have brought out the poor quality of learning outcomes of children which in some measures questions the effectiveness and utility of schooling process for learning.

While schools are one source of learning, there are host of life experiences that children confront which provide opportunities to learn. Several radical scholars have questioned the role of schools in the society as well. While the debate on schools and schooling continue it is relevant to recognize that promotion of alternative spaces of learning would enable children unleash their potential and such opportunities are abundant in the lives of children, adolescents and adults. A pre-requisite for such a space to flourish would be effective facilitation to ignite the spirit of inquiry, debate and reflection among communities. It is with such philosophical understanding that an action research project, viz., ‘Liberate School’ (LS) has been implemented by Aide et Action since 2000 in India. It is aimed at unraveling those alternate learning spaces for children, adolescents and adults.

This documentation is aimed at sharing experiences as well as developing perspectives on how to take forward some of the key concepts to scale. The document is divided into five sections. Following this introduction, section 2 describes the context of evolutionary processes of LS concept. Section 3 describes how action research has been designed and concepts have been evolved and practiced field situations. Section 4 identifies key learnings and the final section discusses the road map for the future.

## Section 2

### Schooling and Learning: The Debate

Given the status of education in India, some of the critical questions come up in the minds of educationists and concerned citizens are why schools are not attractive to children? How to make them more attractive to children? Is there any learning takes place in schools or is it rote memorization of information and facts? How children develop their cognition and abilities to learn in the schooling system which is so unattractive? Is school the only source of learning? What are the alternatives? Taking this further, one would confront even fundamental issues of knowledge and skill acquisition and the role of schools.

Many educationists complain that it is the 'schooling system' that makes children lose all their creativity and eagerness to learn and stifles the mind and spirit of the child.

Few other critical assumptions that come from mainstream are that, schooling is the only process through which learning takes place and that only school age children learn and there are no learning needs for others viz., adolescent boys and girls and adults (male and female). Learning needs of humanity as a whole have to be conceptualized as life long process and school may perhaps be one of the contributory factors, which for many, is infact contributing negatively towards learning.

Yet another basic premise of alternative learning paradigms is that communities learn much more outside the school than inside. Explosive change over the last 25 years in knowledge generation, dissemination and the complexity of our lives force us to understand education differently. What we need today is not a schooled community but a learning community made of life-long learners who have a capacity to learn and adapt to rapidly changing environments and information base.

Similarly other elements of such an alternative perspective are that if we want to make a difference to society, we have to focus our attention on enabling a shift from:

- Behaviorist learning patterns (repeat and reproduce what school already knows) to open inquiry-based constructivist learning (each individual develops her own understanding of the world by an active reflection on her own experience)
- Individual learning to cooperative learning
- Abstract and compartmentalized content absorption to problem, issue and work based learning
- Abstract instruction to life and environment related thematic instruction

#### **Liberate School and Participatory Conceptualization**

'Liberate school' as a concept emanates from such an alternative perspective on learning and how communities learn. AeA India, its partners and communities have undertaken this large action research project to evolve and practice some of these concepts for the past five years in various parts of the country.

AeA India has pioneered in developing this concept through systematic action research which has been initiated after series of studies and discussions in the early 2000 and it has been operational since then in the field areas of AeA partners. The initial studies provided valuable insights in conceptualization of liberate school as well as participatory conceptualization process, which forms the core of the action research. The project identified participatory conceptualization as a process that is autonomous and would enable individuals in community setting to evolve and conceptualize knowledge that would enable them to take actions for the common good. In some ways, this conceptualization emphasizes the autonomy of the individual and groups to discover and construct knowledge and learning through life experiences, reflections and debates among themselves, without external intervention. The basis for such conceptualization of learning and action rests on the disenchantment on the way participatory approaches have been practiced in the development field, which are primarily visualized as information extractive.

Some of the assumptions and underpinnings of such process are critiqued in the evaluation report of the LS project; where in substantial evidences have been marshaled to demonstrate inadequacy and ill-conceptions of human behaviour under participatory conceptualization. These aspects need to be taken on board while attempting to scale up experiences of Liberate School.

### **Evolution of Liberate Schools Concept – A Process**

An initial research was conducted to understand the education system in India and the value that AeA could add to it. Individual consultations were held with educationalist, activists, NGOs, parents and children and it was found through research that education system is unable to meet the needs of community made of life long learners.

Two studies have been conducted in this connection. They are;

- (i) *Present Education System vis a vis People's Perceptions and Aspirations in Madhya Pradesh*, conducted by Centre for Advanced Research and Development, Bhopal (CARD) and
- (ii) *Education: Identification and Development of Learner Based Systems*, conducted by Amod Khanna, Leena Singh and Amitabh Singh of the DEBATE Team, Madhya Pradesh.

Findings from these studies formed basis for developing broader understanding on the action research project 'Liberate school'. It is found that, both teachers and people's representatives believe that the school curriculum is irrelevant to the needs of the community and hence the school does not fulfill the expectations of the community (LIBERATE SCHOOL evaluation, 2004). The research has infact concluded with the hypothesis that if a value chain assessment is to be made, the effectiveness of the education system could be estimated at 10%.

These studies have identified several learning spaces which include, '... livelihood needs related to agriculture, animal husbandry, labour, forest based production, artisanal production and petty business, jobs/service, caste-based specializations, social events and political being. The last category essentially involved understanding caste dynamics within the village, understanding inter-village dynamics and understanding the electoral system. The learning mechanisms identified included learning by observation, by doing and coaching, by practicing and by asking others. The issues, posed as challenges to policy include a challenge to school as the sole medium and model of learning, the recognition of other learning spaces and processes, recognizing the role of

community and popular knowledge, the role of values in education and the role of problem solving in livelihood tasks as constituting part of education'. (*Liberate school evaluation 2004*)

Other findings include;

- "Education" automatically linked to "schooling" and "schooling" to the same people is synonymous with "reading and writing skills".
- People, across all age-groups, caste and gender, confirmed that they go to school or send their children in order to get a job.
- Inquiry on the other benefits of going to school, resulted in an initial round of responses:
  - a. To be able to talk like you
  - b. To be able to read the board of the bus
  - c. To be able to go to the market
  - d. To be able to earn by working on a desk

Their responses seemed to be conditioned by the Total Literacy Campaign (the TLC posters contain these items in its list) but further discussion on the matter revealed that people themselves challenged these ideas.

- In many a case, the decision of not sending children to school, is not linked to economic reasons.
- The village communities have a very negative self-image which school has legitimized.
- The villages have slowly but steadily become dependant and have lost faith in their own capacities and strengths. They are dependent on the school for a job, on the government schemes for development
- Children believe that they go to school to learn to read and write. They believe that by going to school they will get a job. The list of aspired jobs does not differ from those given by adults.

Liberate school project has been informed of these learnings and the design of the project and its implementation processes are hoped to explore the above aspects through community learning processes.

### **Goals and Objectives of Liberate School Project**

*To create awareness on the "disconnects" between "schooling systems" and "learning needs of today". The "Liberate School" Project focuses on promoting learning communities in an attempt to reduce dependency points of the communities and to leverage strengths in people so as to empower them to take charge of their learning.*

## Goals

To facilitate the promotion of Learning Communities wherein the latter:

- Reduce their dependency points
- Recognize and leverage their strengths.

## Strategic Objectives

Enhancement of child and community learning processes in all learning spaces identified by the interest groups (Children and Community)

- Shift of focus from school to the larger learning environment identified by communities.
- Shift of focus from content to learning processes, skills and conditions

Some of the concepts and principles used by the project are as follows.

- Learning is not confined to the four walls of the school alone. LS explores learning spaces outside schools.
- People's learning needs are not restricted to the prescribed contents of textbooks in schools. LS try to identify the learning needs of the people.
- Schooling is perhaps not the only learning space for children. They have their own methods of learning and ways of solving problems.
- LS try to explore these learning methods. It tries to identify and leverage some of these - critical thinking, analysis, reflection, creativity etc.
- The project aims at identifying, documenting and promoting these learning spaces to make education more relevant, contextual, and meaningful.
- Recognizes the need for identifying/ reviving and strengthening traditional knowledge and skills. The project facilitates identification, revival & strengthening of those structures contributing for learning.
- Believes in learning by doing.
- Emphasis on positive enquiry/appreciative enquiry.
- Meetings, small group discussions, interactions, focused group discussions, exposure visits, games, cultural activities, foot marches, workshops, conferences are all used by the project during the interactions at village level.
- LS is process oriented and the project believes in the natural unfolding of authentic learning processes following their own paces.
- Learning is understood as a larger process, going even beyond the school walls. A learner-based content is more relevant in connecting the lives with education.
- Self-initiated and self-organized process of learning seems to be vital to meaningful education.

### Section 3

## LS implementation in AeA India

### Phase I (2001-2005)

Liberate School is an action research project initiated by AeA. The project aims at a new vision through influencing the mindsets of people about school education with an intention to help all involved in education understand learning as a larger process. It believes that self-initiated processes are vital for meaningful education. Liberating schools from the stranglehold of traditional teaching learning processes, structures of administering and the incompetence associated with systems of education has become necessary if the human resource available in the children has to be developed.

With more than twenty five years of experience in the field of education AeA answered the fundamental questions of whether it should continue to support schools for enrolling children to schools and persuading dropout children to return to schools. AeA thought that it has to have a deeper understanding of people's education and decided to reach out to the grassroots communities. A series of workshops initiated and conducted by AeA for understanding concepts of learning and learning communities by involving Shikshantar, People's Institute for Rethinking Education and Development of Udaypur, officials of the Department of Education of the Government of Madhya Pradesh, educationists, teachers, NGOs and representatives of village panchayats brought up plenty of new ideas.

A field-based research was conducted in Guna District of Madhya Pradesh covering more than seven hundred households in thirteen villages. Two NGOs CARD and DEBATE, carried out different stages of this study. Based on the insights from this research the current phase of the research project entitled **Project Liberate School Interventions at Schools: A New Vision on Schooling** is launched. A Deeper Understanding of Schooling Research Support to Initiate 'Liberate School' was launched in 2001 with definite goals and objectives. The study conducted by DEBATE contributed to giving initial shape to concretizing the idea of 'learning spaces' outside and beyond the classroom, and schooling system.

The Liberate School project had its vision of shifting the importance from teaching to learning, and from schools, programmes and teachers to learners and learning processes in all learning spaces. Its strategic objective was to shift the focus from school to a larger environment identified by communities and also shift the focus from content to learning processes and skills. It also had a specific objective to break the mindsets of people on education and schooling. The project desired to identify learning spaces other than school. It planned to introduce conscious learning processes to enhance reflection, critical thinking, critical analysis, creativity and collaboration.

In the Liberate School approach, 'learning to learn' is considered more important than what is learnt. Such an orientation or shift of orientation can be fostered outside the structured space defined by the school, hence the importance of identifying 'learning spaces'. This formed part of the action research component of Liberate School. Another part of the action research was identification of 'learning tools' developed in conjunction with 'learning communities.'

As an action research project initiated by AeA, Liberate School works through its partners in three different states Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttaranchal. These partners are NGOs who have already been working in the field of education with their own objectives to achieve their own vision. They joined AeA as they found the Liberate School Project having common cause with their own objectives. They shared common belief systems towards liberating school education from its structured existence, where it has been projected as the only learning space.

In Madhya Pradesh, the project is implemented through the Jeevan Shiksha Pariyojana (JSP) of Shram Niketan Sansthan, an Anuppur based NGO, in twelve villages of Anuppur District. A team of social workers and village level co-coordinators are working on the project.

In Maharashtra, the project is being implemented through the Kshanokshani Shikshan of Abhivayakti Media for Development, a Nashik based NGO. A team of network partner organizations along with the members of Abhivayakti carries out the project activities in eight villages belonging to Nashik and Ahmednagar districts.

In Uttaranchal, the project is being implemented through Vimarsh of the Missouri based Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas (SIDH). A team consisting of the members of SIDH and village based activists are involved in the project.

AeA and its partners set for themselves specific tasks. Primarily, they wanted to identify learning spaces beyond schools. In addition, they wanted to reach out to communities to use innovative methods of learning by involving members of the community. They also wanted to enhance the abilities of the people to think critically, develop creativity, collaboration and risk taking. More importantly, they wanted to use, test and validate Participatory Conceptualization as a methodology. Through the process they wanted to shift focus to a larger learning environment as provided by livelihood activities and indigenous knowledge. In fact all activities were meant to make a movement towards understanding the macro environment. They believed that Participatory Conceptualization would induce life long learning skills through facilitation of learning processes in identified learning spaces. Through these activities and the follow up, they wanted to create facilitators to interact with learning communities.

The following are the field partners of LS at the beginning of the project in the year 2001. By the year 2005, AMD has remained as partner of LS with implementation, being managed through four associate NGOs viz., Lok panchayat, Yuva Mitra, Lok Bharati and Samhida, all in Maharashtra.

Abhivayakti – Media for Development (AMD) is a development agency working in the area of media and development since 1987 and has been involved in practicing concepts of alternative media development. AMD has been active in strengthening the communication resources of developmental actors in promoting developmental actions. Its mission is to strengthen the voice of voiceless by facilitating developmental concerns and actions.

Basic areas of work of AMD can be classified into the following

- Production of audio-visual material and publications
- Dissemination and media resource centre
- Capacity building in communication and media
- Networking and alliance building.

AMD has been part of the consultations and discussions on LS that have been facilitated by AeA during the conceptualization phase of the project. Lok panchayat, Yuva Mitra, Lok Bharati and Samhida are four small NGOs who are practicing concepts in the field with technical support from AMD. They are termed as partner associates of AMD as they depend on AMD for technical as well as managerial support for implementation of LS project.

LS is being implemented in 8 villages in Nashik and Ahmednagar districts through the partners. There are several initiatives, which are aimed at promoting learning spaces. The following is the description of each of these initiatives, practiced by the communities, facilitated by the partners.

### ***Khelghar***

Khelghar is a concept developed for younger children in the villages. The children include both school going and non school going up to age of 14 years. These activities are carried out twice in a week in the evenings with the children in the village common place. All the activities in Khelghar are facilitated by village animators. These animators are village youth both female and male selected by the NGOs. There are regular trainings organized for animators on various activities with the children. The children participate in the following activities.

### ***Local Traditional Games***

Presently in rural areas all local traditional games are dying and there has been craze to the new games which are not from their local areas and communities. So it was identified as a serious threat that children should know the local games from their areas and the communities. All NGOs recorded the local traditional games and those were played with the children. Children enjoy these local games very much as they are in their local dialects.

### ***Exposure Visits***

Children get seldom opportunities to go to the local institutions like banks, post office, police station, and courts etc. for exposure visit and to know about the functioning of these institutions. The children are also taken to the forests, agricultural fields, artisans, watershed works to learn from practical experience. Children often enjoy these trips and when they come back to the village, they write the details of exposure visit in the wall newspaper.

### ***Children's Mela***

Children's melas are organized in cluster village of the project area with the children. All the children from different villages participate in these villages and perform activities in the village. These activities include songs, dance, drawing, toys making etc.

### ***Wall Newspapers***

In each village children from khelghars write wall newspaper. Wall newspapers contain local news, weather, sports, politics and entertainment from respective villages. Children organize themselves and write wall newspapers. Regular workshops with these children are also organized to improve the writing skills.

### ***Herbarium Preparation***

When ever exposure trips are organized to the forests, children collect different kinds of leaves from the forest and prepare herbarium after they come back to the village. The herbarium also contains details on types of leaves, its features and its importance.

**Learning Resource Centres**

Learning resource centers (LRC) are the centers managed by the village youth where they have books collected from various sources, some sports materials, and newspapers. The village youth visit the LRC daily and read the books and newspapers. They also do some collective action to social issues in the village

**Aamchi Jaaga**

Aamchi Jaaga is a village space for the women where they come together and discuss about various issues weekly or fortnightly. Some of the important issues these women discuss are reviving their traditional health systems. Some of the local herbal medicines were also identified by them and they are reintroduced to cure some specific diseases. These women also do savings and they are linked to the local banks that gave loans to enhance their livelihoods.

**Krishak Jagat**

It is a programme run for the village farmers to improve the agricultural practices through introduction of organic manure. Simple demonstration plots are prepared by the farmers to compare the crops raised by nature manure and vermi compost and crops raised by chemical pesticides. The farmers were also taken to the exposure visits to the areas with best agricultural practices.

**Publications and Video Films**

During the course of action research, AMD has developed material that is useful for children, adolescents and adults in their pursuit of learnings. The purpose of the material is to support and help learners in consolidating their knowledge and also disseminate widely across to others. AMD has also made three films, on LS concepts.

Some of the publications are the following (all in Marathi)

1. Tarun samvad
2. Maajhe paan
3. Khsano Kshani Shikshan
4. Khelghar sanjlayan
5. Geet maati tali
6. Ase aahe aamchi khelghar
7. Gaon mahaiti sankalan
8. aamche aarogya
9. krushak nondi

**Lok Panchayat**

Lok Panchayat is a voluntary organization working in the field of sustainable development since thirteen years in the community of Sangamner Taluka. The organization is committed to the people and their needs. It started with Watershed Development Programme and expanded its area of work towards education, environment and sustainable agriculture. It has successfully developed watershed in 9 villages, through tree plantation, gully plugs, trenches on hilly slope, contour bounding etc. People's participation is the key to its success. Community has done 'shramdaan' to develop watershed in their respective areas. Despite having a significant contribution in the field of watershed, the organization has decided to expand its role to that of a catalyst. This was because

along with the community watershed development programmes, important socio-cultural and gender issues came to the fore. Taking cognizance of this, the Lok Panchayat team involved in meaningful interventions in the field of education, gender issues and rural development. As a result Lok Panchayath supported people to start Bal–Samskar Kendra and saving groups for women to start Income Generating Activity.

Since eight years the organization has also done substantial work in the field of education. The organization has conducted adult education programmes for women and men belong to economically backward classes. Besides, it conducts supportive education classes for the primary and secondary level students living in the remote communities. Vocational courses, which are affiliated to the Yashwantrao Chauhan Maharashtra Open University, provide occupational skills to the needy. Mobile libraries and study circles are providing avenues to those who are marginalized and who are not able to avail these services. Children from Lok Panchayath balwadis are able to cope up with the formal education system. The dropout rate among these children has substantially decreased. Students attending supportive education classes are equally doing well in their studies. Failure rate among these students has reduced to a great extent. This has helped tremendously in building positive thinking among parents towards the education of their children.

Lok Panchayat, in collaboration with Abhivyakti Media for Development, is involved in facilitating informal learning spaces for farmers, women, youth and children. This intervention is in the initial phase in two villages. The learning generated from these two villages is then exchanged with other communities and Lok Panchayath will be expanding the program in 20 new villages.

### **Main Activities**

- Running Khelghars
- Local Resource Centres by local youth
- Organic farming
- Participatory conceptualization

During action research, participatory conceptualization was taken up as a process to promote the concept of liberate schools. Volunteers were identified and trained for this purpose. Children of different age groups actively participated in khelghars that resulted in increased confidence levels among children.

Lok Panchayat also initiated problem solving exercises with the communities in this phase. It is very interesting to note that the villagers united for a common cause and resolved the problem. Pokheri Haveli is a village in which Lok Panchayat started LS action research. An outsider decided to start a bone meal and bone manure factory at the outskirts of the village. They started their activities with unloading bones brought from different places, which attracted dogs from near by areas. The number of dogs increased in a short time, and they used to fight for the food. This caused problems for the villagers especially children who were going to school and playing outside. It became a threat to them as they are scared of dog bites and the associated infections. To put an end to this problem, the villagers gathered together and Lok Panchayath facilitated the process. They discussed the problem with factory owners and made them close the factory.

This is an example of participatory conceptualization. The ideas to deal with the situation emerged from the villagers in their meetings. They showed enough courage to fight with the outsider. They

were able to critically evaluate the consequences of the existence of the factory as well as fighting with an outsider. Despite the fact that there were people in the village who belong to the community of the factory owner, they stood together without giving any communal color to the issue.

### **Yuvamitra**

Yuvamitra is a registered organization working at Sinnar Taluka of Nashik District. It has been working in the areas of education, youth development, women empowerment for the last seven years. The organization has been governed by a seven member board. The programme areas of Yuvamitra's include Balamitra: creative methodology for children education, panchayat sakhi: training of women elected members to PRIs and formation and development of self help groups of women engaged in savings and credit activities. Yuvamitra has also taken initiatives for addressing the issues of malnutrition among children with various nutrition and health initiatives. In the area of promotion of livelihoods, Yuvamitra has made in roads in the areas of promotion of agriculture and dairy. Yuvamitra is the regional coordinating agency of the network-Uttar Maharashtra Lokvikas Manch with about 28 grass root level organizations, covering the districts of Nashik, Ahmednagar, Dhule, Jalgaon and Nandurbar.

Yuvamitra has been associated with Aide et Action, as a partner for implementation of "Liberate School Project" popularly known as 'Kshmkshani Sikshan' for the last four years. The programme has been piloted in two villages, Ramnagar and Jamgaon, in the Sinnar block in the last four years.

### **Main Activities**

- Local Resource Centres
- Khelghars
- Training of Volunteers
- Participatory Conceptualization
- Meetings with teachers

Yuvamitra is actively pursuing community participation as it believes that community participation is key to the success of any development program. Yuvamitra concentrated on utilizing the traditional knowledge and transformation of that knowledge to children. They also focused on environmental education as they felt that children should understand concepts like nature, and things available to us in the environment and their usefulness in day-to-day life.

Community learning facilitated by volunteers of Yuvamitra is a unique experience by itself. They worked with the community called Ramoshis, a low caste which has been labeled by the erstwhile colonial British Administration as a criminal caste. Almost all the men are fallen prey to alcoholism over the years. Even 10-12 years old children are addicted to liquor consumption that resulted in chronic malnutrition among children. Men wouldn't go for work, ended up in loss of wages and difficult to run families. Starvation is a common phenomenon in the village. Yuvamitra selected this village while doing a regional survey. The initial program consisted of a local resource centre that attracted many children in the village. Soon, the youth in the hamlet, age group twelve to sixteen were attracted by the activity and organized themselves into a group.

After the initial period of building mutual trust, the major woe of the hamlet, its shameful public secret, was identified by the youth group. Over a relatively short period of time, the youth group managed to convince the older group of men to abjure alcohol consumption. This marked an almost magical turning point for the entire hamlet. Agriculture, which was languishing, started yielding more food crops. Men started improving their earnings and household savings increased since the expenditure on liquor vanished. Many collective events were organized by the youth, in which the entire community actively participated. There has been a marked impact on the surrounding hamlets of other castes. Earlier, even a child from one of the upper caste hamlets could beat a Ramoshi laborer, whose dependency forced him to accept such humiliation. Now the situation is completely changed. Villagers from surrounding hamlets have started saying, "If the Ramoshis can improve their own lot, why can't we?"

### **Expansion Phase – 2006**

The action research phase of the project, which was ended by December 2005, was implemented in about 8 villages of Nashik and Ahmednagar districts of Maharashtra. Abhivyakti – Centre for Media Development and its associates have implemented the action research phase. Substantial learnings obtained from the pilot phase have prompted AeA India to plan for scale up of the project and its elements.

AeA India planned to scale up some of the LS concepts such as *Khelghar* for children and activities with adolescents and influence government to adopt in mainstream education system so that education becomes relevant and contextual to the lives of the children and communities.

### **From Action Research to Scale Up**

While the pilot phase has demonstrated immense opportunities available for children, adolescents and adults to engage in meaningful and relevant learning opportunities, there are also some challenges. They are:

- How to make the project more cost effective in terms of coverage and impact
- How to introduce some of the learnings in regular on-going projects so that learning becomes more meaningful?
- The role of volunteer/facilitator; how can that be made more local and relevant?
- What are the meeting grounds between formal education systems and liberate school approach and philosophy to learning? How can there be a dialogue established?
- What are the issues in scale up of liberate school experiences?
- Strategies for documentation of experiences and strategies for dissemination.

Faced with the above challenges, AeA India has embarked on a scale up of the project. Discussions with AMD and associates held in the month of September 2005 have provided scope for expanding the existing operational area as well as identifying elements for scale up.

## A new vision

A new vision for the project has been evolved through series of consultations within AeA as well as interactions during our visit to AMD and associates in the month of September 2005.

It is visualized that liberate school project provides a powerful framework for creating opportunities for learning outside the formal schooling system among children and a creative interface of the two would be beneficial for children, adolescents and adults.

## Thrust Area

Plans for the year 2006 have emanated from the above perspective and AeA has embarked on a large scale up of the project in the current location as well as introduce the project components among the field areas of regular field projects. In the year 2006 the following expansion plan has been envisaged.

Expanding partnerships with four of the AMD associates viz., Yuvamitra, Lok Panchayat, Samhida and Lok Bharati so that they would be able to demonstrate cost effective and sustainable models in the field. Later, for operational convenience, AeA entered into partnership with Yuvamitra and Lok Panchayat in the end. AMD to engage in documentation of experiences and facilitate learning and sharing workshops. AeA partner NGOs (regular partners) would adopt and implement some of the main components of liberate school project in their field areas. Promotion of Khel Ghars, adolescent learning centres, resource centres have been planned.

At present, Yuvamitra and Lok Panchayat are implementing LS project in 40 villages in Nashik and Ahmednagar Districts. One year of implementation with concentrated effort resulted in many successes in the field – from community mobilization to discussing the LS concept in various forums such as block level meetings, district level meetings, and a network of NGOs called NGOs Association of North Maharashtra.

## Activities in Expansion Phase

### Yuvamitra

Yuvamitra has been associated with Aide et Action, as a partner for implementation of “Liberate School Project” popularly known as ‘Kshanokshani Sikshan’ for the last four years. From April 2006, Yuvamitra has been engaged in the expansion of the project in 20 villages. The objectives of the programme are:

1. Create and explore the co-learning and self learning spaces in the community
2. Explore the possibilities of community interventions and sharing in the school education system
3. Motivate youth about natural resources and means of livelihood.

The whole process was dynamic in nature and centered on the learnings of communities and it enlisted the active participation of community members. The main activities carried out in 2006 were:

**Khelghar:** In all villages a learning space was created with organization of non-competitive games, drawings, songs, stories, sharing of experiences. This space was expected to develop creativity and ability to critical analysis among the children. All the children in the village come together enjoy, the co-learning space. These kinds of activities will be convened three times a week by the village- Khelgar volunteers.

### **Khelgar Volunteers**

Khelgar volunteers were developed in each of the villages, as a village level resource person. Yuvamitra took the responsibility for their capacity building and sustained motivation, through workshops, meetings and exposure visits. The following process was followed in developing the volunteers.

- a. Identification of youth volunteers
- b. Formation of youth groups
- c. Training of volunteer
- d. Follow-up meetings with volunteers

**Maitri Shibir (Friendship Workshop):** Maitri Shibir is an activity to strengthen the relationships among the children themselves and also their relationships with the members of other age groups, especially youth, women and farmers. The place for this activity was child friendly and the activity were planned and organized by the children themselves.

**Wall paper:** Wall paper is a creative expression of children. Children write songs, stories, experiences, news from school and village and make drawings etc on the wall paper. They also write about culture, history, geography of their villages. This wall paper is published once in every month. Field coordinator will take responsibility to create and publish the wall paper with the help of youth volunteers.

LS activities were implemented in Dondveernagar in a big way. Yuvamitra paid lot of attention to this village as this village doesn't have transportation facility and not connected with outside world. The government school is located in the centre of the school, and the villagers would peep in to see what their children are learning. Once the children wrote an interesting story in the wall news paper. The head master for some reason got the trees cut that were there in the school. Children who have been attending Khel ghar and resource centre were well aware of the importance of trees. Yuvamitra had taken up an activity with the children called environment walk in all the project sites. While cutting the trees, children made a protest not to cut them and explained the headmaster that trees give oxygen, shade and all the benefits of trees. In spite of that, the headmaster went ahead and got the trees cut. Children were upset with his act, and they captured this incidence in their monthly wall news paper. The news paper was published by Yuvamitra and was pasted in all the important locations of the village including a temple which is at the centre of the village. This news caught the attention of villagers and they asked the headmaster why he had the trees cut. The headmaster couldn't respond positively, and said that he would plant trees as a replacement. When the AeA staff visited this village, he shared this experience and said that you can't do mistakes in front of children because they immediately question you as they don't have fear to question elders for their wrong deeds.

**Gummat Jatara:** This is an annual event of all children from the proposed twenty villages. During the jatara, 1000 children came together, shared their experiences, played games, sang songs and it was a fun fair.

**Publications:** In 2006, three publications are proposed to organize the learning and for the use of wider dissemination of the learnings.

- Khelghar experiences
- Forest walk and youth experiences
- Local livelihood resources

Mr.R.D.Bhalerao is the Block Development Officer of Sinnar Block in Nashik District who is an active and enthusiastic officer, keen to learn new concepts in education. In one block level meeting he met Mr. Sunil, CEO of Yuvamitra, who explained him about LS concept that is being implemented by Yuvamitra in 20 villages in Sinnar block. Mr. Bhalerao expressed his interest to visit the project area to gain first hand information about the project. He visited the villages, and understood the activities like khelghar, local resource centre, wall newspaper, and Gummat jatra. During his visit, Mr. Sunil requested him to provide support in terms of teachers' participation in the program. Mr. Bhalerao, issued letter to the teachers working in all 20 villages to take part in the activities of LS and attend meetings convened by Yuvamitra. In the beginning, teachers felt that it is going to be an extra work for them. But Yuvamitra's staff convinced them and took them to show how a khelghar and local resource centre would run. The teachers realized the importance of the concept of LS, and in some villages they allocated a room for LS project to run local resource centre. AeA staff, in her recent visit, met Mr. Bhalerao and appraised the progress of the project, and requested him to take measures for teachers' participation in the program as their participation is not uniform in 20 villages. He said that he would discuss this matter with the teachers during block level meeting, and also said that he would be interested to implement the project in another 20 villages which is a positive effect that the project created.

### **Lok Panchayat**

'Lok Panchayat' team started its work 'Liberate School Project' very enthusiastically. They arranged one orientation workshop for their staff that created motivation among the group. The main activities of Lok Panchayat in the expansion phase were as follows:

#### **Launching of Khelghar**

Khelghar activity was started in few selected villages in the beginning and expanded to all the 20 villages over a period of time. Khelghars were conducted at least 2 to 3 times in the beginning to attract children and the villagers.

#### **Children and Youth meetings for selecting Volunteers**

After introducing Khelghar to the children and youth, Lok Panchayat arranged meetings with them and discussed for taking up a role as Khelghar Volunteer. They selected 4 to 5 volunteers by the selection process and arranged one meeting at Lok Panchayat on 30<sup>th</sup> May. In the meeting, they explained the volunteers about the 'Liberate School' Concept.

## Training of Khelghar Volunteers

Lok Panchayat organized a 4 days training camp for Khelghar volunteers on 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> June. 47 Khelghar volunteers from 10 villages participated in the training camp. The content for the training included

- What is Liberate School?
- How to play and conduct non-competitive games?
- Singing songs
- Learning different crafts.( origami, greetings etc.)
- Story telling
- Acting
- Shramdaan.
- Planning for next 2 months.

One of the unique initiatives taken by the children was a campaign against alcoholism. Kare is a village in Ahmednagar block where LS project is being implemented by Lok Panchayat. Children of this village are very active and participate in khel ghar and resource centre activities. Self help groups are also very active in this village. Chandrabhaga Darade is a very active member of one self help group. She is a Panchayat ward member and also works in the Anganwadi centre as teacher. Under her able guidance and leadership, children united and came forward to take up a rally in the village against the ill effects of alcohol consumption and took measures to close liquor shops in the village. Villager, especially the daily consumers get offended and entered into an argument with the children. But the children were very strong, and convinced them that it not only affects their health, but also their living. Villagers realized the consequences of the problem, and gave up the habit. As a result, all liquor shops in the village were closed. Now Kare village is totally free from alcohol consumption. Impressed by the steps taken by children, the village school authorities gave a room to children within the school premises to run local resource centre. The headmaster and some teachers in a meeting said that children became very active after participating in the activities of LS, and their learning abilities were also improved.

Both Yuvamitra and Lok Panchayat are part of a NGO network called NGOs Association of North Maharashtra. They attended the meetings convened by the network and shared about the experiences of LS project. Overwhelmed by the new concept, Janarth Adivasi VA Samajhik Vikas Samstha, NGO in Nandurbar district, which is also part of this network, visited LS project sites in Lok Panchayat area. They stayed at Sangamner for two days and visited the villages, had meetings with the community and Lok Panchayat staff. They were very impressed to see things on the ground and decided to implement LS project in their operational area.

## Section 4

# Lessons from LS Experiences

### Phase I

There are several learnings that emanated from implementation of LS which can be summarized as follows:

#### Action Research Groups

People have joined various action research groups -youth, women, farmers, children- and have addressed various issues concerning their lives. Obtaining the wages, arranging drinking water, fighting alcoholism, health, environmental cleanliness, farming, are some of the themes addressed by the people. Improving quality of life is a major concern for members of the communities.

#### Interaction between Learning Spaces

The different learning spaces in the village like 'the home', 'the neighborhood' 'the farm', 'the temple', 'the market', 'the shop' the school and so on were closely interacting with each other. However, the introduction of new learning spaces with the initiative of the project has led to new possibilities of enhanced interaction. Village Resource Centers for all members of the village, 'Khelghar' and 'Bal Chaupal' for children, 'Gammata Jatra', 'Bal Mela' (children's festival), Mothers Sammelan (meeting for women), 'Kishori' 'sammelan' (meeting /Conference for adolescent girls) have all lead to new dimensions to the existing learning spaces of the village. All these spaces are now in the process of interacting with each other much more than they did in the past.

Schools have shown keen interest in the project-related activities of children. The schools have provided their premises, including the playground for the Bal Chaupal and other activities of the project. Gradually the Khelghar/ Bal Chaupal activities have found their way to the school too.

#### Interaction between School Going and Non-School Going Children

The non-school goers and the school going children have started interacting with each other more and more, through the new learning spaces that are available to them. Bal Chaupal, learning space for children in the villages, allow the school goers and the non-school goers to interact and learn from each other. They learn through playing various games, including the traditional games of the village (some of them perhaps not popular in the schools), through discussions, through cultural activities, through projects etc. One of the results of this is the new recognition by the community that 'the non-school goers are also learning.' This is indicating a growing change in the mindset of the people that 'Education means schooling'. Children have become more self organized, self disciplined, creative, critical and bold. They have become more active in schools, too. The relationship between Khelghar and school is changed.

## Learning Processes

The early results from the project indicate that more and more interest groups are being organized. In other words, identification of issues and interest groups formation is the immediate processes. Reflection, critical thinking and analysis are some of the learning processes that received a boost. Discussion and dialogue, raising questions and questioning, are being reflected in many forums of interaction across different learning spaces.

## Empowerment of the People and the Children

The new learning spaces and the process of learning that were boosted through the project have enhanced the capacities of the members of the communities. They have gained confidence in themselves. Those who were afraid of the Government authorities, earlier, are now fearless in interacting with the bureaucracy, including questioning, writing letters seeking solution to their problems. The release of wages of workers from Audhera village is an example of growing empowerment.

Children are now interacting, more and more, across the boundaries of school, and across the synthetic categories of literacy. The non-school goers have begun to recognize their own capabilities and as a result are feeling 'quite comfortable' with the school goers.

Youth from the villages have opened up and are getting involved in the various political activities of their own villages. They feel that the issues of village are their own issues. In Ramnagar youth formed a group and helped women in stopping alcoholism. When there was scarcity of water in the village they came together and pressurized Gram Panchayat to bring water tanker in the village. Involvement in Krishak Mitra process has generated their interest in farming. They are also taking initiative in doing experiments in their land. Their involvement and responsible behaviour in the families is also significantly noted by the elders.

- Liberate school concepts provide opportunities for learning and highlights unlimited potential of human learning.
- It demonstrated the importance of alternate learning spaces for knowledge generation, sharing and learning.
- It has a potential to create a larger impact on communities
- Well established relations among the NGOs, teachers, children, and the communities
- In many villages, the government schools have a given a room for local resource centre which is a positive thing to note, and it reveals that teachers are interested in the program.
- However, there is a need to appreciate and understand linkage between alternative learning spaces and formal learning systems, especially public education system that caters to majority of poor children

## Phase II

As mentioned earlier that the action research brought some interesting issues into light, second phase of implementation was concentrated on cost-effectiveness in terms of coverage and impact and also selection of volunteers to facilitate the activities at village level which was made local and relevant to the project.

### Volunteers

It is good to see a group of volunteers running khelghar activities, and local resource centres. The volunteers are self selected in many places and in some places they were identified by the NGOs. They are studying 8<sup>th</sup> standard, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> standard and few of them are drop outs from the school. These volunteers are active with lot of enthusiasm and they also feel that they are leaders and proud to say that they run Khel Ghars and resource centres. They have a different identity as 'khel ghar Saathi' within the village and it gives an impression that the LS activities would continue after the withdrawal of the NGO from that place.

### Youth Groups

Youth groups are formed in all the villages. They were trained on the concept of LS by the NGOs. There is a regular interaction between the NGOs and youth groups. These youth groups are managing the local resource centre. Apart from collecting books and magazines to the resource centre, youth groups mobilize the community to send their children to khel ghar and resource centre. They also conduct street plays on the social issues like child marriages, girl child education, water and sanitation and so on. In other words, youth groups play an important role to achieve the desired impact through LS.

### Advocacy

Advocacy plays an important role to promote the concept of LS and success stories after implementing the project. Yuvamitra and Lok Panchayat are participating in several block level and district level forums, and sharing their experiences of LS project. They could generate interest among others that resulted in people visiting the LS sites, appreciated it, and want to implement in their operational areas. The Block Development Officer of Sinnar block was overwhelmed by the idea of LS, and decided to implement in 20 villages as government program.

## Summary & Conclusion

- Liberate School Programme, in its administration and experimentation through innovative interventions, has established the need for facilitating learning and discovering new learning spaces beyond a system called 'schooling'. Though the programme has drawn its dimensions from a tool called 'Participatory Conceptualization', the different interventions, interactions and their interplay have resulted in projecting the role of the facilitator to the forefront in Participatory Conceptualization.

- Liberate School Project can be successfully used for introducing innovative learning processes as evidenced by the reports of activities, some of these have been experiments, associated with various programmes conducted as parts of action research on the process, by AeA and its partners.
- Liberate School concepts need to be clarified further, at the conceptual level, on the basis of practice with the various communities, as undertaken by partners. This will help further evolution of the necessary theoretical constraints as well as clarify the ambiguity with respect to the role of facilitation / facilitators.
- Liberate School activities have no record of failed attempts. This inhibits learning processes of facilitators / partners since it is not possible to understand the limitations, if any, of Participatory Conceptualization.
- Liberate School Project leads one to see its enormous unrealized potential. However, as an action-research approach it requires the freedom that is necessary in all research activities, to allow the researchers to step back and reflect upon their findings.
- There is no evidence of Participatory Conceptualization as defined by the authors, as a process that does not need any facilitation, in the action research that has been conducted through the activities of AeA and its partners.
- That Participatory Conceptualization has been a process in which a facilitator may have a role is proved beyond doubt by the action research conducted by AeA and its partners through different activities in several villages and that the quality of the facilitator would also decide the quality of impacts is evidenced through the activities.
- That Participatory Conceptualization can happen without facilitation has been evidenced by some of the activities listed as success stories by the partners. However, even in this, there have been emergent leaders who acted as facilitators.
- Participatory Conceptualization without a facilitator may have a risk and this risk is in the form of possible collective actions that may even be detrimental to humanistic tendencies of living and even may promote social evils like violence or denial of basic rights.
- Participatory Conceptualization may be more effective if or when the facilitator associated, which may include even an emergent leader, has necessary competence to involve and lead conceptualization processes. Such competencies are developable.
- Participatory Conceptualization can be successfully used in assemblies of people and therefore it may work well even in a scholastic assembly like a school or college or any organized group of people.
- Participatory Conceptualization may not be possible, in large number of cases, without at least an initiation by a facilitator, one may call that person a catalyst; all the same, that person happens to be a facilitator.

- Participatory Conceptualization, which can be allowed to happen through a highly committed individual, may also fail when the participants act upon a course of action that is detrimental to their own society or other societies, or are very unscientific; it is then that this individual's commitment to the group will persuade her or him to be intellectually responsible, and therefore, intervene.
- Participatory Conceptualization with facilitation can work in situations of community struggle provided 'problem identification' is strictly left to the community; facilitators have to be very clear that they should not intervene to shape the dialogue process at that level / stage.
- LS as a new concept created interest and enthusiasm among teachers, community, and children. But there should be a continuous effort to involve teachers in the program as the objective of the LS is to mainstream the concept into regular school system. Many teachers felt that it is a good concept, and children are faring well in all the aspects of schooling, but their participation in the program is sporadic. They are not in favor of attending meetings convened by the NGO due to some professional issues. This issue was discussed with the BDO, and he said he would issue a letter to them to participate in LS activities and attend meetings. It was also felt by the NGO and AeA staff that they shouldn't be forced or threatened to participate in the program.
- Volunteers and youth groups are the pillars for the success of the program. But how should we sustain their interest is a matter of concern. Yuvamitra is implementing a livelihood program to the youth and also taken up the responsibility to put them to work. This needs to be strengthened in terms of consistency, and continuation in order to have a long term effect
- In some villages, community is not well aware of the positive effects that the LS would create. There needs to be a focus on social mobilization so that the community would realize the importance of LS, and once the community is convinced, they render any amount of help required to the success of the project, and can also act as a pressure group and see that teachers would participate in the program
- Lok Panchayat developed self help groups in its operational area. These groups are matured and strong, and work towards social problems in the respective villages. It is suggested that they should utilize these women groups in community mobilization, teachers' participation, and monitoring khel ghars and resource centres
- Documentation is one area that needs focused attention. Both the NGOs don't have staff with strong documentation skills. Hence, it is suggested that they should focus on this aspect and hire at least one person who has strong documentation skills

## Section 5

### Way forward

LS as a concept stems from strong philosophical and ideological positioning on the way learning takes place and how various factors contribute to learning. The action research that has gone in developing concepts around these have enabled us to appreciate various forms and trajectories of learning and in this context, translation of ideas and concepts generated in the field into more usable form becomes more challenging task. LS practitioners have learned substantially during the past four years and their experiences form basis for extending the concepts to wider public domain. The limitations of participatory conceptualization as an analytical category has also been extensively researched and understood as evidenced in the evaluation report on LS.

There are several activities that the partners have experimented with under LS. They range from creating learning spaces for children, adolescents, women and men, organic farming by men, group organisation and promotion of women, resource centres for adolescents and creative and activity centres for young children are some of them. Research, documentation and lessons learned were conducted through active participation of community members. There are efforts also to involve community in recording indigenous technical knowledge, local folk songs, games, plants and seeds etc so that knowledge is generated locally. These have been taken up in various partner field areas with different intensity of support. However, at the conceptual level, how extent all these are autonomous learning opportunities is something open for discussion and the role of facilitator has become very clear in many occasions as they are key for sensitive facilitation of learning, though conceptually they become redundant.

Of the concepts that LS has experimented with “Khel Ghar” and “Learning Resource Centre” for adolescents appear to have created a greater impact on children. There are several positive lessons on these and there is also scope to enhance its effectiveness and outreach so that more numbers of children can participate.

The scope of including adolescent girls into the program, creating spaces for them in more innovative way, creating more opportunities of learning through involvement of teachers into the program which would help changing teacher attitude, creating spaces for learning in some structured form are some of the suggestions coming from the field, which need to be taken on board especially if one were to expand the scope and implement it on scale across India.

Towards this end AeA India has committed to expand the scope of the project learnings and implement among all the other regular partners in a systematic way. This enables AeA India to create wider impact of disseminating the same across wider canvas.

At the same time, AeA India would also invest in learning from the existing experimental field areas and facilitate good documentation of the field experiences so that learnings will be captured in a systematic way.

Operationally, this would mean conducting immersion program for existing partners on LS concepts and later introducing the same in their field areas. It is proposed that in each village a

two volunteer team would be set up who would be normally young adolescents from the same village. They would be trained by the NGO field staff on LS and regular review meetings would be held to take stock of the progress. It is proposed that LS expansion to new areas would be a cost effective model so that there would be scope for large scale replication by the government and other agencies.

School teachers were roped in and so also are communities whose participation and sharing would lead to transfer of learnings and skills to children and adolescents.

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