

Innovations
for
Empowerment of Rural Women

I. Background

1.01 This innovative project is being conducted under the auspices of the Indian Institute of Education, Pune, in Shivapur village in Pune District, through the Institute's Centre for Education and Development of Rural Women, established in 1993. The Institute has an all-India status as it is one of the social science research institutions conducted under the aegis of the Indian Council for Social Science Research, New Delhi. It is also affiliated to Pune University for M. Phil and Ph.D. programmes in Education (Interdisciplinary).

The main objective of this project is to evolve alternative strategies of education and empowerment of rural women so as to enable them to participate, as equal citizens, in the economic, political and social sustainable development of the rural society.

1.02 Rural women still remain a disadvantaged segment of Indian society. Statistics show that whereas 86.1 per cent females are engaged in agriculture, the figure of males is 74 per cent. But there are hardly any special programmes for enhancing women's agricultural skills. While 7.1 per cent rural females are engaged in manufacturing, the percentage for rural males is 7 i.e. less than that of females. But most of the training programmes have hardly any female participation. While rural males have opportunities in construction, trade, transport, storage, and services, these are mostly denied to rural females. Obviously, opportunities must be created to enable them to acquire the skills necessary for entering these newly emerging occupations.

1.03 In the field of primary education, the system calls for much overhaul since centralized curricula, heavy text-books, centralized teacher-recruitment, orthodox pedagogy, unsuitable school-timings and vacations, rigid and distrustful supervision and administration, have been the main hurdles in its reaching the rural masses. Besides, the primary system is traditionally connected with secondary general education. Productive skills and the cultural contexts of education are ignored. The solution now perceived by India's educational thinkers and planners is liberation of the education system through a movement for adult literacy and non-formal alternatives for meeting the urgent as well as long-term needs of the rural and tribal people, especially women. Science and technology components are visualized as essential educational elements for future-oriented education. Life-long learning through alternatives in education, especially continuing education for diverse needs and groups, is, therefore, the main concern of Indian reformers. The Institute's project on empowerment of rural women through innovative strategies for life-long learning is in response to this concern, which it fully shares.

The Institute emphasizes that rural women's mindset of 'dependency' must be changed so that they become conscious of their abilities to change themselves, their families, and their community. Their empowerment would lie in becoming creative, self-dependent,

individuals. Some of the action-research projects of the Institute have provided insights into the methodology of enabling the oppressed to reflect upon their predicaments so as to find ways of learning new skills and approaches to become effective partners in development, to become "subjects" of transformation through arousal of self-esteem. The Institute's projects, which witnessed such change, are :

- (a) Non-formal primary education for rural girls.
- (b) Science and technology for rural women.
- (c) Promoting health, family welfare, and community development with focus on women and girls.
- (d) Training of rural women as Animators for women's empowerment and community development.

These projects, conducted since 1979, have covered over 200 villages in Pune District, in typical agro-climatic areas viz. (I) tribal, (ii) hilly with heavy rainfall, (iii) drought-prone, (iv) rain-fed, and (v) irrigated. The project at Shivapur started in 1994-95 is located in a rain-fed area. This sample was selected as nearly 80% of the rural area in India is rain-fed and more or less shares the special characteristics, which obtain in this sample-area.

1.04 The modalities of conducting these projects have been a mix of ethnological research-techniques, perceptions of Paulo Freire on 'education as cultural action for freedom,' and Gandhian principles of constructive action for the regeneration of rural India. The role of researchers and their field-level colleagues is that of stimulators of community development. This process begins through informal meetings and discussion of local problems as posed by the people. The programmes begin when the community helps prepare the outline and selects animators for the project. The animators are the link between the Institute and the community. As the programmes evolve, there is continuous informal evaluation of the outcomes. Successful practices emerging from action-research are sought to be institutionalized in the life of the community. In this project for empowerment of women, men have been purposely involved so as to help free and frank appraisal of women's situation and the way programmes may be organized without conflict in the family and the community.

1.05 Through this process, the community is provided an opportunity for 'self learning.' Once it gets used to such a self-learning process, it gains sufficient self-confidence to decide its objectives and achieve them. Action-research takes the form of community-education for enabling the people to acquire skills to 'make' development in response to their pressing concerns. Involvement of women in this process of community-education on an equal footing with men, helps overcome the constraints in their usual relationship of 'subjects' and 'objects'. The Institute characterizes this process as non-formal education for development, fashioned in collaboration with the learning-groups and their community.

II Objectives, Targets, Time Frame

2.01.1.1 The project on empowerment of rural women is conducted through the Centre for Education and Development of Rural Women (CEDRW) which is itself an innovation in Indian education. The experimental area of this Centre is at present 10 villages for total coverage of the communities concerned. But it reaches out to nearly 130 villages in the surrounding area through informal communicators from among primary teachers, school pupils, health-camps, vocational education for women, and so on. The overall objective of the Centre is to move towards sustainable rural development through the empowerment of women and life-long learning opportunities for all, in the experimental area. The

demonstration effect of the transformation in this area is expected to stimulate other communities to replicate or adapt the transformational strategies of the CEDRW activities.

2.01.2 Under the main objectives of this experiment, the following action oriented objectives are being pursued:

- (i) To organize educational and empowerment programmes for girls and women
- (ii) To train resource persons, animators and trainers for implementing activities visualized in the objectives.
- (iii) To conduct and promote experimentation, innovations and research in the problems and programmes of empowerment of rural women.
- (iv) To integrate socio-economic activities with concern for health and environment protection, in the light of the rural women's cultural contexts.
- (v) To invest science and technology in women's education and empowerment programmes to enable them to acquire scientific temper and to enable their family and community to engage in the process of sustainable development through the 'reflection-action' process.

2.02 The target population is :

- (a) Women and girls in the rural areas in Maharashtra State.
- (b) Rural communities in general, through women's education and empowerment programmes.

2.04 The CEDRW is visualized as a constituent Centre of the Institute. Its programmes are to evolve continually, with their stages fixed differently by different participating groups, at different phases in development. Training programmes for NGOs and others would be developed on the basis of the experience gained by it. Although time-targets of three to five years are laid down by funding agencies, these time-blocks indicate phase-wise evolution of different activities. All activities are dynamic and conceptually inter-related. They would undergo modifications in the light of transformations seen in women's situation and community action for development.

At present, the Centre is engaged in the following major activities:

- (a) Rural Women's Self-help and Savings Groups.
- (b) Training, without gender-distinction, local farmers and artisans to acquire modern techniques for improved production of rice, wheat, sorghum and vegetables, and raising their competence to the level where they can function as local instructors for the training of women and men in other locations for conducting these activities for food security and seeking markets.
- (c) Investing science and technology in women's programmes through the agency of the Vigyan Ashram (Science Hermitage) and Forum for Science and Technology for Rural Education and Development (FOSTERED), which are the other field-based programmes of the Institute.
- (d) Conducting innovative vocational education programmes for adolescent girls and older women (ages 15-45), with assistance from the Department of Education of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.
- (e) Conducting a health and personality development programme for women and adolescent girls through camps, dramatics, reading circles, Yogasanas, health information communicated by medical personnel, developing a women-run pathology-laboratory, a population education programme, and promotion of women's sports, games, creative arts, with help from various resource organizations and resource persons.

- (f) Nutrition education and education for child development for both male and female parents, through a Child Recreation Centre for children of 3-5 age-group, and through periodical cookery and food processing exhibitions organized jointly by men and women parents.
- (g) Investigating women's needs for fuel, water supply, sanitation, agricultural activities, horticulture, medicinal plants, etc. so as to conduct demonstration and training programmes including promotion of non-conventional energy sources, and so on.
- (h) Promoting investigation of indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, arts and crafts, so as to build empowerment-action on the foundations of the people's own stock of useful knowledge and technologies.

III Partners in the Project

There are two aspects to the development of this project : (a) Provision of infrastructure for CEDRW and funds for programmes, (b) provision of innovative ideas. The infrastructure consisting of land, buildings, and equipment is provided thus: land for CEDRW by the State government; buildings by the Indian Institute Trust and Katholische Zentralstelle (Germany); furniture and equipment by the Institute Trust; programmes by the Govt. of India, Foundation for Alternatives in Development (Pune), UNESCO, Rotary Clubs and private donations. (c) Ideas: Chairperson of IIE Trust, Director of CEDRW, local staff, and the community.

IV Processes of the Project

On receiving possession of the sanctioned plot of land, the Institute began preparatory action for establishing the CEDRW. This was a new venture which called for detailed discussion in the Institute's Board of Trustees. The Institute is a 'Registered Society' and a 'Public Trust' which observes the legal framework laid down by the State government for such voluntary agencies. The Institute's approach to community-mobilization is not only through the people's present needs but also through their cultural practices, to the extent possible and desirable. For instance, no new construction is undertaken by the people without propitiating the land-deities. The Institute used this culturally important device to draw the villagers of Shivapur closer towards the CEDRW. The ritual of 'Bhoomi-Poojan' (Earth-Worship) ceremony was entrusted to the local leaders. A local priest recommended by the villagers was invited to officiate at this ritual. It needs to be mentioned here that in the ancient Indian concept of nature-worship, the earth (land) represents the Mother i.e. the 'Source of Life'. Along with the earth, prayers are also offered to four more life-giving elements, viz. water, energy, air, and sky-space. This ceremony was held at sun-rise. Sweets were distributed by village-women to the large gathering of villagers. Women, children, old persons, had come in large numbers. The ritual had got them unconsciously involved in the CEDRW project. When the construction of the building was going on, villagers came frequently to watch it. Village leaders asked questions and made suggestions to the architects. They helped procure local labour and made available the services of such local artisans as carpenters, masons, smiths, painters, and so on. The boulders dug out of the arid land were broken to provide the stone required for construction. The Institute's use of local material and its thrifty ways of constructing the simple building, were appreciated by the community. These socio-cultural aspects of the preparatory action for CEDRW were part of the interdisciplinary approach adopted by the Institute in social research as related to educational transformation. This helped break the barriers between the intellectuals and the people, which is a necessary condition for people's participation in socio-economic transformation of India's rural life. In particular, these approaches enabled the Institute to draw women villagers towards the CEDRW as rituals and thrift are deeply embedded in their psyche.

V Inputs

5.01 The first programme of the CEDRW was to convert barren land into a haven of greenery for rural women's activities. For this purpose, it was necessary to find a Director and support staff with experience of the rural education and development. Their knowledge of gardening would be additional assets. Trained women in this category can rarely be found through advertisements. Therefore, contacts were made with social workers and educators. The search succeeded in finding a person who had a rural background and was acquainted with the Institute's objectives. She had also done educational work in rural surroundings and conducted training programmes during India's community development movement undertaken in the sixties. As Principal of a Secondary Teachers' College which served two predominantly rural districts of Maharashtra, she was closely acquainted with problems of rural education and development. Her love for gardening and agriculture were additional assets. On joining the CEDRW, the first programme she took up was greening of the site of CEDRW and used this activity for establishing contacts with the community. The Panchayat (Village Council) of Shivapur, progressive farmers, government functionaries, and the women and girls on whom the programmes of the CEDRW were to be focused, became informal participants in planning and helping with the Centre's development. Formal relations were consciously avoided. The methodology of tree plantation was discussed by the Director with the villagers. They helped procure water-supply and labour for digging pits and trenches. Plants were obtained by the Director locally and also through government nurseries, plant-nurseries of agricultural universities through her personal contacts. Adequate funds for this activity were provided by the Institute's Trust and a jeep was placed at the disposal of CEDRW for her convenience. Visits were paid by her to Panchayat (Village Council) members, teachers, and leading farmers of Shivapur and nearby villages, so as to publicize the kind of new trees she was trying to introduce in their area. This aroused the interest of several farmers. They demanded saplings of new varieties. She brought and bartered these for whatever the farmers could provide for the CEDRW greening project. Nothing was given free. Village women approached her with demands for herbal plants required for cooking and daily worship of household gods with fruits and flowers. She set up a 'plant-barter system' for them. This way the women could locally find the plants they needed and barter these among themselves and share them with CEDRW. She also got them plants from outside on the same terms. This system of 'plant exchange' enabled the women participants and others to learn about new varieties. When the rains began, a plant-festival was organized by them at the CEDRW site. Nearly two hundred trees were planted as a multivariate plantation of trees for fruits, flowers, fodder, fuel, timber, medicinal use, and craftwork in wood. Some varieties of flowering plants and creepers, medicinal herbs entirely new to the areas, were brought to test the possibility of growing them in Shivapur and its surroundings. Villagers began to visit the plantation in groups to see how it was growing. As the plants grew, they saw new varieties of mango and other fruit trees thriving on the barren land of CEDRW which they had helped develop. The saplings of new varieties planted by farmers and women on their household plots also thrived well. The Director then invited agricultural experts and horticulturists and organized their meetings with the community and held special sessions for women. The bonds between the Centre and the community got strengthened through a common cause, innovatively organized.

5.02 The Director searched for a young husband and wife team, with good academic qualifications and some rural background to help her. This was not an easy task. However, through informal groups of rural consultants which had gradually formed around the CEDRW, word spread around about the staff required for it. A young couple, both of them science graduates having done their Masters in Social Work, agreed to join the Centre, on an experimental basis. The Director oriented them by involving them in activities. She gave them

full facilities for settling down in the staff-quarters of the CEDRW. The typist at CEDRW, a retired primary teacher who maintained accounts, two farm-assistants, and a watchman, became their local support staff. Discussions with the Director and trustees of the Institute helped the staff to understand that the Institute's technique of personnel management is a matter of personnel development. There is freedom for all to plan and carry out activities. But the spirit of team-work is important.

In the light of the Institute's overall objectives and the specific objectives of the project, the staff is free to work out details but is required to make informal analytical reports of the process from time to time so as to discuss successes and problem areas. At each stage, the plan is revised and modified if required. Where necessary, statistics are viewed in the light of the process-analysis and given the weightage appropriate in terms of objectives. Instead of filling prescribed report-forms, itemized narration is favoured. Action-inputs are decided through participation of the clients. This style of personnel development appears to have been yielding good dividends in project performance.

VI Strengths and weaknesses

6.01 Strengths

(i) The philosophical foundation of the project

The main source of strength for this project is the philosophical stand of the Indian Institute of Education that (a) all human beings are equally important, (b) given the opportunity, they can make positive contribution to the betterment of their own lives and those of others in society, (c) an educational process which stimulates gathering and creating knowledge about man and nature, leads to prevention of conflict not only between man and man but also between man and nature, and (d) it is not individual acquisition of goods but the process of sharing and co-operation that would bring about sustainable development.

This philosophical view leads to participatory approaches for fashioning education as a process of individual empowerment and social transformation in an integrated fashion. This view naturally endorses the principle of equity and, stimulates the disadvantaged to overcome their disabilities by understanding them as problems to be solved constructively. This process can be construed as individual and social 'action-research' in the interest of personal and social transformation for sustainable development of man and his environment. CEDRW activities reflect this philosophy.

(ii) Experience

The Institute's mandate is 'health for all' and 'education for all'. As a matter of conviction it avoids the 'provider' approach to development and pursues the participatory approach which can combine the efforts of the intellectuals and the people. Development is interpreted as the 'opening out' of the energies which lie dormant in society and can be awakened through such combined effort. Alongside, studies of educational history, educational policies and planning, the nature of educational reforms and their outcomes, are areas of research. Also, field-research in rural education is continually undertaken by the Institute. The insights gained from this work provide strong inputs for the CEDRW activities.

(iii) Personnel

Participant personnel in some of the field-projects of the Institute have absorbed the Institute's philosophical standpoint and grasped the techniques of organizing projects accordingly. The Director of the CEDRW belongs to this category. This is a crucial asset for the project. From her example, the other staff at CEDRW picks up the cue and collaborates. This leadership has brought the project the major part of its success.

(iv) Readiness of the community to participate

The ground for this project had already been created through the Institute's non-formal primary education project and non-formal health education project in this area. The community 'accepted' the Institute as a friend who shared their concerns. They also knew that some persons from the Institute worked for the project voluntarily without expecting any financial gains. This induced respect for the Institute's personnel. This was the reason for the readiness with which the community welcomed the establishment of the CEDRW, as their own centre.

6.02 Major attainments

Among the major attainments, we would include the following as illustrations of women's empowerment and community mobilization through the activities of the project:

(i) Seeing how busy older women were in their chores at home and in farms or wage-labour, CEDRW organized camps for adolescent girls who could become communicators for empowerment. This strategy has led to (a) demands from girls and women for education in agriculture, horticulture, health and nutrition and cultural activities. These have been organized. Also, a demand for a special library for women and children arose. This has been established along with membership fees which are willingly paid by the members. Men have sought extension of this library. Community contributions are being received. Girls oriented in the camps have planned circulating libraries for the nearby villages. Some women members have formed a "Devotional Music Group". Story-telling sessions are now popular among young readers. Urge for learning shows increase as the library provides books, charts, models, journals, and daily newspapers.

The adolescent animators are now establishing a 'Science Club' and a programme for removal of superstitions, with focus on health, hygiene and environment protection.

(ii) Training of farmers, both men and women, has resulted in (a) increasing the yield of rice by 30% to 70% on their experimental plots. Scientists from the Institute's Forum of Science and Technology for Rural Development guide this activity of the CEDRW. Inputs were also received from the extension-service personnel of the National Chemical Laboratory. The participating farmers were trained in the techniques of applying fertilizer briquettes and maintaining daily record of their observations on the experimental crop. They discussed these with the scientists who held weekly meetings with them. The programme is now enlarged to include wheat, sorghum, peas, and a few vegetables. This experiment is an outstanding example of eminent scientists and the rural people working together and learning from one another without status-distinction. Also, the lead taken by women-farmers in this experiment is clear evidence of their empowerment.

(iii) The vocational craft-education programme has received enthusiastic response since it is combined with information on sale and purchase of products through actual visits to nearby suburban and urban markets and also producers of ready-made clothes, woollen goods and resin-articles, etc. Local women who had some skills in tailoring, sewing, knitting, etc. were selected to become trainers in this programme and were given further training on a recurrent basis. The products of this programme are now in considerable demand in local and urban-markets. Resin bags, purses, etc. are particularly popular.

(iv) Volunteer-teachers for 'work-experience'

An off shoot of the women's vocational programme is preparation of "volunteer-teachers" of 'work-experience' for the nearby primary schools. These local women 'volunteers' have been trained by the CEDRW in pedagogy and class-room management. They are welcomed by the schools as children flock to their classes. Attendance has increased and drop-out already shows a decline. This achievement has a positive implication for universalizing primary education in the project area.

(v) Women's economic empowerment

Women's 'Self-help and Savings Groups' are on the increase and their efficiency is noteworthy. No external financial assistance has been given to them to start and conduct the operations of these groups. Deposit amounts have grown and are credited to the nearby rural banks. The banks have praised their regularity and clear accounting. Women-members restrict their withdrawals to purposes which are productive of more funds. The Consortium of Eighteen Self-help Groups meets regularly and maintains records as required. Their example has induced two 'Youth Self-help Groups' to undertake this activity without any external funds. The women's groups have become empowered enough to function as guides and social support to these Youth Groups.

(vi) Science and Technology Hall

On a demand from the nearby schools and communities, particularly from girls and women, a 'Science and Technology Hall' is being established on the CEDRW campus as an 'activity-exhibition' and 'lending museum'. New technologies appropriate to local development and selected by community members including women, will be operationally exhibited. Facility will be given to school-children, teachers and community-members to conduct experiments and develop, modify, adapt technologies. Equipment will be loaned to members, including schools, if they prove their urge and ability to use it for further learning of science and technology, and for discovering useful processes on their own initiative.

The Hall has been constructed by the Institute Trust with some donations. Funds for equipment like computers and for appointing a Co-coordinator are yet to be collected.

(vi) Improving the quality of primary schools

The Village Education Committees in the project area requested CEDRW to help stimulate the quality of learning in primary schools. Three measures were proposed: (a) Guiding the teachers to analyze the prescribed curriculum from grade I to VII and consider the possibilities of local adaptation (b) Analyzing text-books in relation to such adaptation, and (c) Improvement of teachers' skills in the language of instruction (Marathi), mathematics, and English (second language from grade V onwards).

Through the contacts of CEDRW, outstanding secondary teachers were invited as Resource Persons to meet primary teachers. Problems were frankly discussed. A programme of 'further-learning' has begun as required by the teachers. This includes subject-skills, techniques of communication, women's empowerment for gender-equity and appropriate child-socialization, health and nutrition for the 'pupil-teacher-parent-community' combine, and creative cultural activities. The 'planning and monitoring group' for this activity includes the Educational Extension Officer of the Zillah Parishad (District Council) with a view to future spread of such "further learning programmes" for teachers elsewhere in the district.

(vii) Child education as parental activity

The two demonstration Centres for child-education conducted at the CEDRW (Child Recreation Centres) focus on involving the parents in activities for child health and nutrition, social and cognitive development of the child, and making the whole family an active colleague of the CRCs in the interest of the child, the family and the future community. This goal has almost materialized. Parents have become participants in making teaching-aids, preparing and providing nutritious food, teaching games and songs, telling stories, celebrating festivals and so on. Parents have ultimately to 'own' the CRCs as their precious device for shaping a cohesive family and contributing to the children's future as part of community effort for sustainable development.

6.03 Weaknesses

The project has succeeded well, supported by the commitment, scholarship, and field-experience of the senior members of the Institute's Trust and the dedication and experience of the Director of the CEDRW and her willing colleagues. Rural education and development have been her concerns over almost thirty years past. The main weakness experienced by her is the difficulty in finding younger persons who would devote themselves to rural transformation and social research in a spirit of genuine humanism. Analyzing this situation, one perceives that the CEDRW innovators who have grown up in the Gandhian tradition of putting service before self, wish to build similar new cadres of social mobilizers and researchers. It is not easy to find such personnel. But some of the thoughtful young scholars connected with the Institute are likely to move to the field in the near future. They have realized that concern for equality and 'sharing' which dominated the early years of India's independence, appears to have diminished. The recent change over to a market-dominated economy has given rise to consumerism and acquisitiveness. As to the voluntary service for the education and empowerment of the dispossessed, the entry of liberally funded NGOs in this field has been luring young workers away to highly paid posts and reducing volunteer work.

But despite these trends, the Institute is confident that a cadre of young scholars and field-workers can gradually take shape if those who have come up from the grass-roots are selected and oriented to respond to the rural concerns. Also, inducting local people into the processes of change in a more intensive manner is already showing encouraging results as in the case of the 'bare-foot' trainers for new agricultural technology, vocalization of middle-school education through 'work-experience' and the success of adolescent girls as 'Animators' for women's education and empowerment. A programme for the genuine empowerment of the dispossessed can overcome any small weaknesses it might encounter.

VII Impact

The impact of the project is clearly seen, as already indicated in the statement of 'successes' in (i) people's participation and communication, (ii) self-belief, self-confidence, and self-esteem, (iii) gender equity and women's empowerment, (iv) the concern for preservation of environment, and health and hygiene including nutrition.

What is most evident is the growth of 'sharing' as demonstrated in (a) 'sharing' and 'bartering' plants and seeds, (b) sharing expenditure on play-things and uniforms for children in the Child Recreation Centres, (c) awakening to the improvement of local primary schools so that all children may get good education, (d) the 'Self-Help and Savings Groups', and (e) the programme of agricultural development in which highly placed researchers have been sharing their knowledge and time with local farmers who do not ask for subsidies and even meet the expenditure on obtaining the fertilizer briquettes required for their experiment. The habit of 'asking for help' has taken a back-seat. The community has evidently acquired the self-esteem which results from self-dependence. This important behavioural change is the main instrument for overcoming economic poverty since it is acceptance of dependency that is the basic cause of poverty. This impact is seen among both men and women, young girls and youth, in this project. This is the true success of this project and a strong indication of its lasting impact.