

# The Efforts of NGOs to Improve Public Education

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## The Efforts of NGOs to Improve Public Education

### Lessons from Anandshala, Samastipur, Bihar

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#### 1. Introduction

The deficiencies in school education in India are well known. Though enrolment, in general, has gone up drastically, irregular attendance, dropping out of students, (especially, in the secondary grades) and poor learning achievements are challenges that persist. Standardized tests indicate that nearly half of the children who are in school do not have the expected grade-level proficiencies. Though these tests may not be the best indicators of their educational achievements, there are no indications of significant achievements in terms of other dimensions too.

This situation has driven a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to work with government schools. These NGOs have been following different strategies to facilitate the mobilization of communities, such as supporting paid volunteers from the communities in order to check the dropping out of children; providing in-service training to teachers; or supporting the management of schools. Most of these are carried out on the basis of a formal agreement with the state governments.

However, there is not enough information on what makes these

interventions effective or leads to a sustainable improvement in the public education system. Some of these interventions may have to be cut short and their impact lost if the government officials who are promoting these, move out. There is also no clear strategy of how to increase the number of changemakers within the government through the intervention of these external organizations.

It is in this context that we look at the work of Quest Alliance with the government schools in the Samastipur district of Bihar. This intervention was started as part of the School Dropout Prevention Pilot (SDPP) program, a project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in four countries during 2011-15. It was a randomized control trial undertaken with 113 intervention schools and 107 control schools and 'was designed and implemented for grade V students to understand the reasons behind school dropouts and pilot strategies to solve the issue effectively'. The team which carried out SDPP in India registered themselves as the NGO, Quest Alliance, after the conclusion of this program. The SDPP and the follow-up actions of Quest Alliance are aimed at enhancing access to schooling. From 2015 onwards, it has focused on a district-wide education program called, Anandshala reaching one thousand schools in the Samastipur district in partnership with the state government of Bihar. In 2017, it proposed a district education system in which all stakeholders including teachers, headmasters and education functionaries of the government have been working towards the shared goal of ensuring quality education and child engagement in all schools.

This report is based on a short-period field-work in the Samsatipur district where this program has been implemented. We visited a set of schools and interacted with the teachers, other education functionaries (Block and Cluster Resource Persons) parents, and staff of Quest Alliance.

## **2. The Anandshala program**

As part of this program, the organization combined a strategy of using an Early Warning System (EWS) for dropouts and another to improve the classroom engagement by making it attractive to children. The EWS system identifies students who are at the risk of dropping out by looking at school records and by taking certain response actions. However, the focus of the program in India is on the enrichment activities in the classroom, for which it has trained education functionaries such as the Block Resource Persons (BRPs) and the Cluster Resource Coordinators (CRCs) and through them, the school teachers. Different activities are tried out to make schooling attractive and prevent dropping out. These include peer-connect among students, Bal Sansad (children's parliament) and the use of the last class each day for creative activities. School assemblies are also used to discuss a number of relevant issues and also to encourage/facilitate leadership among students. A short description of these activities based on our observations is given in the box below.

## **Bal Sansads, Morning Assembly, Last Class Activity**

### **Bal Sansads**

Bal Sansads are student committees which share the responsibility of various activities in the school. They actively participate in the planning to the implementation of different programs within the school. These students' bodies analyse the issues of their school and take the initiative to solve these, which contributes to the building of their crisis management and leadership skills. Student representatives from senior classes are named as prime minister and ministers and those from the junior classes, as assistant ministers. These students head various departments like health, cleanliness, learning, garden and so on. They maintain a diary of absentees in their class along with the reason for their absence. These children, with the support from their teachers, also visit the homes of regular absentees and motivate them to attend school; mediate in small fights between students; and, prepare a weekly school newspaper. They are involved in making their learning spaces attractive, whether it is by creating and maintaining a vegetable garden, having more pictures and charts in their classrooms or decorating classrooms during special days and functions.

### **Morning Assembly**

The Morning Assembly Program which was started during the SDPP program is still continuing. The teachers are trained to add value to the morning assembly, as this is the first activity in the school every day and its proper organization can positively influence the rest of the class hours.

### **Last Class Activity**

The use of innovative arts and crafts for teaching/learning is the main focus of the last class activity. This creative use of the last 45 minutes ensures that students remain in the school till the end of the school day. Origami, paintings using naturally available colours (from bricks, leaves, charcoal etc) and fortnightly theme-based activities are also included. Topics related to the syllabus (festivals, environmental issues, climate, importance of trees, urban life etc) and other general issues of the village can be the theme for a fortnight. The students are divided into groups and the teachers and the students jointly select the theme after every two weeks. The activities can include a general discussion on the theme, the creation of poems, stories, write-ups, role plays and drawings, etc. The teachers find it useful as it contributes to learning, as well as, a feeling of camaraderie among the students.

The Anandshala program has also used a group of boys and girls from the locality of the school who have completed grades X and XII as 'community champions'. These volunteers (who have received a nominal honorarium) have worked with children and parents in the community, and also with teachers to facilitate the school-community connect and through the process tried to reduce the possibility of students dropping out. This program ended in 2015 and hence we could not see its functioning. However, we could interview one community champion and the observations based on the interview are discussed here, in a following section.

The focus of the engagement of the Anandshala program was to strengthen what is called the 'Teacher Dropout Prevention Practice' (the practices of teachers to reduce the dropping out of children). However, an impact assessment of this program (through randomized control trials) showed that there was no significant improvement in this desired outcome. On the other hand, the program has a significant impact on the emotional attitude of students who are at the risk of dropping out. It also has a positive impact on the perception of parents and teachers and on the attendance but not so much on the learning achievements of the children. The internal records of the organization note a significant difference in the Hindi reading comprehension (in comparison with the baseline of the National Achievement Survey). In summary, the program did not impact the dropping out of children significantly. There are structural (socio-economic and familial) factors that may have a bearing on the retention of children in schools and probably interventions such as Anandshala may not be adequate to overcome the influence of these factors. However, the program had an impact on the attitude of teachers, education functionaries, and some sections of students who were at the risk of dropping out.

Based on the experience of the first Phase of the Anandshala program (2012-2015) and also through consultations with

different stakeholders, Quest Alliance has come out with a revised strategy for the following years. The first action is to create a set of change leaders within the public education, which may include BRPs and CRCs, and to facilitate the CRC-teacher meetings; the second is to identify and recognize good practices around child-friendly schools and disseminate these practices in schools in the district; and thirdly, to begin a district-level advocacy program to bring about desirable changes in public education.

Some of the key aspects of the program are:

- The program builds on the existing policies and provisions at the district and school level, which will make its implementation easier.
- The organization understands that sustained efforts are needed to make a difference in the public education system. Hence, they have taken a decision to function within the district for five years. Though they started with a school-based approach, it has moved towards making a change in the public education system of the entire district.
- The focus is on building change leadership at different levels: CRC/BRP, headmaster and also students, through the Bal Sansad. Their approach to creating change leadership does not seem to be one imposed from above or outside (by external experts). The stakeholders are encouraged to identify the problems and find solutions in an organic manner.
- There is a conscious attempt to create a more positive discourse and sharing through narratives and stories among a wider section of stakeholders. We have seen this enhancing the confidence of different stakeholders who believe that a desirable change is indeed possible.

Currently, the organization is also running a set of Anandashala Resource Centres (ARCs) which aim at building the capacities and career opportunities of the youth. These are

functioning in the Cluster Training Centres in the premises of various schools. The activities include sessions on IT and soft skill development including that of communication in English. There are different batches for teenagers and adults. We could see younger women participating in career and entrepreneurship opportunities programs. Most girls were interested in taking up government jobs but there may not be many opportunities in the sector. Though the ARCs are open to all, mostly girls and young women are enrolled. Those who are attending the trainings are also motivating other girls and women to use the facilities at the ARCs. Job fairs too are organized occasionally and girls are getting employment opportunities in the private sector. This initiative is important for the overall goal of 'quality schooling for all' since the increase in job opportunities through the ARC can enhance the students' incentive to complete school education.

Rather than looking at the impact of the Anandshala program, this report focusses on the larger challenges faced in schooling in this part of India and also suggests possible strategies to overcome these. We focus on the role that can be played by interventions like Anandshala and identify certain key processes that are followed by this program, the lessons from it and also the possibility of using these for enhancing the quality of schooling in regions where the dropout rates are high. We find that the impact of the Anandshala program on education functionaries such as the BRPs and CRCs is an important opportunity/possibility that other organizations can take note of. How to use this opportunity to bring about organic changes in the public education system is also discussed in the final section.

### **3. The Social context: Our observations**

There has been a significant increase in the demand for schooling in the region. The aspirations of girls even in the rural areas and those who attend government schools have changed and they aspire to be a police constable, a school

teacher or an engineer. Even those who have been married at a young age and who could only complete a very basic level of education aspire to get government jobs, and hence, writing recruitment tests for these has become a major practice even in the villages.

It does appear that the Government of Bihar has started investing more in its schools. There seems to be some improvement in the school infrastructure although dilapidated buildings and shortage of classrooms are common. There is enough allocation of resources for the mid-day meal and there is a significant effort towards this purpose. All these could be part of the investments towards human development that Bihar has seen during the last couple of decades. These may be driven by the political transition that has taken place in the state during this period by which the non-elites have started acquiring political power and also competitive politics has been strengthened<sup>1</sup>. However, there are a number of serious challenges faced by these schools, especially those that we visited in the Samastipur district.



There seems to be a severe scarcity of teachers in these schools. Regular teachers are very few, the rest are guest or contract teachers or those employed by the local governments. Out of these teachers, some are on deputation or in some other working arrangement outside of schools and hence, are not available for teaching. We could see classrooms with 80 children. The interest in education and also the efforts of government and NGOs have led to a drastic improvement in the enrolment of children in the primary grades. However, public resources available for education did not increase correspondingly so as to bring down the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) to manageable levels. Bihar seems to be at an early stage in terms of the transition of government schools and so, a large number of children in rural areas do use these schools. This essentially means that the inclination by which a section of children moves towards one or the other kind of private schools has not reached the level where the number of

children in government schools comes down thereby reducing the pupil-teacher ratio (a tendency seen in many other states which started to witness an increase in the demand and provision of schooling many decades ago).

Though there is an improvement in attendance due to the work of organizations such as Quest Alliance; and, the efforts of teachers and education functionaries, irregular attendance continues to be a serious issue. Attendance on any given day in schools is only around 70%. It can be even less in some schools. Among those children who do not attend school on a given day, a large number comprises of 'regularly irregular' or those who attend school only very infrequently. We visited the house of one such child and it seems that the parent (whom we interviewed) and the teachers are unsure of how to deal with this issue. We also tried to visit the home of some children who were not in school that day. The death of a relative of a person who lives in the village (and not anyone from the village itself) had kept three to four children from attending school on that day (though these children were in the village).

It is somewhat intriguing to us – the outsiders – that most of the secondary grades have an unequal sex ratio of students. A typical classroom may have 50 girls and 35 boys. The sex ratio of the population at birth or at the time of enrolment in grade I, is not unequal. In fact, the number of boys could be a little higher than. It is interesting to analyse the reasons for this phenomenon of the 'missing boys' in secondary grades in government schools. There may be two factors at work here (and that is evident from the consultations with headmasters, BRPs and CRCs): First, boys may have been transferred to private schools. This may have happened in the case of the lower middle-class families that are willing to pay for the schooling of their sons but not daughters. Some of these schools may be located at a distance, and hence the reluctance of parents to send their daughters to distant schools could be

another factor. However, this exodus of boys to private schools cannot explain fully the unequal sex ratio in secondary grades. This is because some boys drop out of school to take up work when they reach the secondary grades. There can be a migration for work too. The disinterest in schooling combined with family compulsions to generate additional income could be the cause of this problem. An accurate headcount of these boys has not been possible as most of them are not present in the village. It would appear that there is not enough appreciation of this problem of the missing boys in the secondary grades among teachers and education functionaries. However, the compulsion to take care of household work does not seem to make a serious impact on the attendance of girls. There are instances of early marriage, but it does not seem to affect secondary schooling too much (but could be an issue in higher secondary grades).

Though there are structures for the participation of parents in the affairs of schooling (like the School Management Committees) and these are functional, these do not seem to be leading to a significant improvement in the quality of infrastructure and the betterment of facilities. This could be partly due to a lack of a felt need on the part of parents due to their own poor living conditions. A stagnant pool of waste water or ill-functioning school toilets may not cause too much concern in these localities where most people practice open defecation. Local political processes may enable the construction of a school, but it may not be able to improve the quality of schooling both in terms of the facilities and also teaching/learning.

#### **4. The Anandshala program: Our observations**

It is clear that there have been interactions as part of the Anandshala program with multiple stakeholders of the public education system in the district. The headmasters, teachers, BRPs/CRCs of the schools that we have visited have interacted with the program at multiple levels.

The organization has been able to get and build the capacity of a set of resource persons who are located at the district headquarters. These persons have a good understanding of not only the challenges in education but also the difficulties in influencing teachers and other functionaries of government schools. They are sensitive to their delicate role – as external people who are trying to make a change within the education system. Having such a set of personnel at the district level is an important advantage for the organization.

The interventions have increased the attendance rate in the target schools from around 50% before the intervention to more than 70% currently. Before the intervention, children would usually leave school soon after the mid-day meal in most of the schools and the teachers would sit idle or would also leave the school early. However, the intervention seems to have changed this. This positive impact on attendance has been noted in the impact study conducted for the USAID too.

The most notable part of the intervention of Anandshala, according to us, is the creation of a set of CRCs and BRPs who have been made aware of the need and the proactive steps required to improve the attendance and retention of children in schools. The program has interacted with 52 CRCs and six BRPs. We could interact with three of them (two CRCs and one BRP). They narrated the kind of proactive steps that are taken in different schools within their jurisdiction with regard to those children who are irregular and/or at the risk of dropping out. We could see a set of transformed and committed leaders among these functionaries. Their interaction and familiarity with Anandshala are also notable. They seemed to have developed a cordial relationship with the resource persons of the organization.

The two headmasters with whom we interacted also demonstrated a high level of proficiency in the management of their schools. Anandshala seems to have developed a good connect with them and other headmasters, and this seems to be making a

positive impact on their practices. Most of the trainings of teachers under the program were carried out by CRCs and BRPs with support from the resource persons of Quest Alliance. The on-site support provided to teachers is also spearheaded by the functionaries of government schools (aided by the external resource persons). In that sense, it is a model somewhat different from that used by other organisations which attempt to provide training to teachers directly. The model followed by Anandshala seems to be a sustainable one since it would enhance the internal resource-base of the public education system to improve the capacity and quality of teachers.

However, there can be some loss of communication in the training of teachers carried out through this 'transfer' process. Though we have seen teachers who have attended the training and attempt to implement their learning in the classroom, our impression is that there is scope for substantial improvement in the quality of instruction even by these teachers. The big class-size; the relatively poor quality of schooling (and higher education) in these parts of India a few decades ago and the way it has influenced the educational preparedness of teachers; and, the quality of pre-service training are some of the factors that may have affected the capacity of teachers.

As noted earlier, there was a focus on community-connect at the beginning of the program by having a set of volunteers from the locality as community champions. However, at the end of the first phase, their services were terminated. From what we note from the leaders of the organization, there was some unhappiness among these community champions when their services were terminated. We interviewed one of the former community champions who is currently working as a school teacher. Though the experience of working with Anandshala has not helped him to become a teacher, it is enabling his performance as a teacher. He noted that most of the challenges encountered in schooling were known to him as a community

champion of Anandshala. A few other former community champions have secured similar teaching positions and some others are preparing for recruitment tests for various other jobs. The organization has provided them with a series of trainings before the termination of their services on different themes, such as soft skills which will help them in finding jobs.

The current status of community-connect appears to be weak. The focus now is on the improvement of the classroom and school processes to improve the attendance and reduce the number of dropouts. According to us, this can be due to two reasons. The first is the difficulty in working with communities for an organization like Quest Alliance without community mobilisers. The need to terminate the first set of community champions may be deterring the organization from enlisting such mobilisers again. Secondly, this can also be based on a common perception among educationists and practitioners that the improvement of the classroom and school processes can mitigate the issue of attendance and retention to a great extent. However, our impression is that the retention of children in schools in this area continues to be driven (primarily) by the structural (socio-economic and familial) factors. This implies that both the achievements in this regard and the persisting challenges can be shaped significantly by these factors. In such a context, the possible improvements in attendance or retention that can be achieved by reforming the classroom and school processes may be limited. This could be the reason for the limited impact of Anandshala on the retention of children – a finding of the impact analysis that is mentioned earlier.

## **5. Key Lessons**

Based on an understanding of the social context and also the work of Anandshala, we are highlighting a few key lessons for Quest Alliance and other NGOs which work with government schools to provide 'quality schooling for all'.

## **5.1 The model of working with CRC/BRP**

We have mentioned that an important part of the Anandshala program is to work with CRC/BRPs and provide support to these functionaries so that they can train and provide on-site support to teachers effectively. Given that a set of effective education functionaries have evolved, there is a need to draw lessons from this model of intervention in public education. Though we have seen attempts by other organizations to work with these middle-level education functionaries, we have not seen many successful models of this kind. This is important for Quest Alliance too, especially in designing the next phase of Anandshala. A set of well-functioning BRPs and CRCs can bring about positive changes not only within their jurisdictions but also in the nearby districts.

We have seen cases where the best practices among teachers are used and disseminated among other teachers to bring about positive changes in the public education system. A similar strategy can be used through the demonstration of the best practices among the BRPs and CRCs.

## **5.2 How to scale up the operations of Anandshala**

Quest Alliance is planning to scale up this program. The organization plans to work through partners to spread out the program to other blocks and other states. Their staff will continue as the main trainers and other organizations with a strong base in the community will be identified for partnering. The strategy is to combine the field experience of the partner organization with the expertise of Quest Alliance.

If our understanding is correct, most of the work carried out by its own resource persons in the clusters and blocks of Samstipur district is planned to be transferred to a partner NGO. It is possible that Quest Alliance may be able to identify and partner with credible and resourceful NGOs. However, this may take time and it may be difficult for each of these partner NGOs to create a set of resource persons who have the credibility and sensitivity to deal with CRCs, BRPs,

headmasters, and teachers. In general, working with teachers and education functionaries requires a certain credibility and the former should feel that they can gain academically through the interaction. The interactions with the personnel in public education have to be carried out in a sensitive manner (considering their personal egos). In addition, one may see over time, an enhanced educational achievement on the part of people who become government school teachers and other functionaries, and the set of resource people who can interact with them may need to have comparable (if not higher) qualifications, and it may not be that easy for a local NGO to employ such people given the overall status of education in these regions and also the vagaries of short-period funding. Our view is that Quest Alliance needs to analyse this change in strategy critically. It is in this context that we suggest, as in the previous section, that they consider those BRPs and CRCs who have acquired a higher-level capacity and demonstrated a readiness to take proactive steps in collaboration with the headmasters and teachers (to improve attendance and reduce dropouts) as change agents in nearby areas or through networks and information-sharing among a wider set of education functionaries.

### **5.3 The Need to understand the transition of community champions**

The use of community volunteers to work with parents and communities to improve the attendance and retention of children is a strategy that has been tried out by a number of NGOs in India. (A description of the need for such a strategy and a small experiment conducted in a district institute of the Azim Premji Foundation is given in Santhakumar et al, 2016). It has been argued that it is important to have such volunteers from the local community and also preferably girls who can motivate other girls to attend school. However, the transition of this program of engaging community volunteers faces a number of challenges. Given that these people may start with minimal educational achievements (grade X and XII)

and that too from schools that do not offer very good quality learning, it may be difficult for NGOs and foundations which usually employ well-educated people to consider these people for long-term employment. Whether these volunteers who work full-time for community mobilization for two to three years will be able to acquire higher levels of education required for decent employment is also doubtful. This may result in some of these volunteers getting frustrated with or adversarial to their organizations towards the end of their service and it may lead to a difficult situation. Hence, there is a reluctance on the part of NGOs and foundations to engage community volunteers.

Given this possibility, it may be interesting to look at the experience of the use of community champions as part of the Anandshala program. It has used nearly 220 such volunteers and continues to have contacts with these people. Hence, we suggest an understanding of this experience and the opinion of these community champions of working with the Anandshala program and afterwards.

#### **5.4 The challenges in access and quality of schooling need continuous engagement**

Some of the persisting issues of irregular attendance and dropping out of boys as evidenced from 'the unbalanced sex-ratio' in secondary grades are discussed earlier in this report. These challenges have to be addressed to achieve schooling for all in these localities. However, this will not be enough for achieving quality schooling for all. Our informal discussions with headmasters indicate that around or more than 50% of children do not acquire the expected grade-level learning proficiencies.

Headmasters and teachers feel that low performance cannot be attributed to any particular community. However, various factors like the engagement in household chores, lack of learning environment in at home, absence of role models, less or no support and motivation from parents, etc also determine

learning achievements. While some teachers feel that children's lack of interest is a determinant of low performance, a few others believe that all children are enthusiastic and curious and it is the duty of teachers to impart education that interests all children. Teachers connect the low attendance with poor performance and feel that the gap in learning achievements is higher in lower grades compared to higher grades.

Though retention has positive impacts and can be considered as the first-step, achieving grade-appropriate learning is the next important challenge and this may also require effective interactions by NGOs. Organizations such as Quest alliance may have to think about appropriate strategies with regard to the inadequacy of teachers and the high number of children per classroom, the two factors that are inimical to quality schooling. The academic quality of the interaction with the public education system may have to be at a higher level when the quality of learning or teaching is the main concern. There is a need to improve the access to and quality of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the district. The lack of infrastructure and appropriate teaching/learning materials and the inadequate capacity of pre-primary teachers are the limitations in this regard.

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