

What ails Noida: Why are Children ' Out of School'.

-Dr Mala Bhandari, SADRAG



India is on the path of rapid growth and development in nearly all the sectors. Off late, the once most neglected, social development sector has caught up the attention of the government and all the concerned stakeholders. India has now rightly realized that it cannot integrate with the rest of the world with its lopsidedly developed countrymen and regions. So the words like 'inclusive growth' are in vogue. There has also been a growing realization that development cannot be brought about by the charity model alone. Instead, what we need is the Development Model, based on alliances and partnerships between the government, corporate, philanthropists and various other stakeholders. This model can only bring about sustainable development over a period of time.

Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state comprising 16% of India's population. NOIDA is one of its largest planned industrial townships, situated in close proximity to Delhi. It is now a part of the National Capital Region (NCR). Where on one hand, Noida boasts of an integrated Industrial Township with a high standard of living for its people, on the other, its various villages reel under inadequate infrastructural and other facilities. The major inhabitant of these villages is the vast migrant population from different regions of the country. These men and women add significantly to the growth and prosperity of this industrial town through its skilled / unskilled labour. Boggled by the daily grind of parental routines, the children remain deprived of their basic right, i.e., education. Their education is not only neglected but is not thought about even. The parental tag of 'kirayedars' (tenants) in the community hinder their transition to the formal school system. The children in the growing years of 6 to 14, have no options but to either work in shops or 'dhabas' or stay at home to look after the younger siblings or perform household chorus. Children, otherwise loitering around in neighbourhoods are a very common sight. The question here is where should these children be? If the answer is, SCHOOL. Then the immediate question is why is it not so? Where do we go wrong/

The reasons are many. In India, education is the state subject. Universalization of primary education (Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan, SSA) is a flagship programme of the central government. When Noida has the SSA programme and the district education department is responsible for ensuring Each Child – In School, hundreds of children are still out of school. Whom do we blame? Lack of will or lack of coordination among the stakeholders!

Social and Development Research and Action Group (Sadrag) conducted a census survey of 'out of school' children in the various 'bastis' and villages of Noida. As per a humble estimate, there are above 1000 vulnerable children at three locations in Noida, i.e., Harola village in sec. 5, Nithari village in sec. 31 and JJ colony in sec. 16. These children are either school drop-outs or have never attended a formal school due to family or the various systemic reasons. As a result, they either add to the already burgeoning problem of child labour or join the army of disgruntled adults later in life. These are the children who become soft targets for anti-social elements.

Complementary to the role of state / district education department, Sadrag has been mainstreaming the 'out of school' children with a rights based approach. Conceptualized on the community centric approach, "Ugta Suraj" programme caters to the educational and recreational needs of around 150 children. With support from the local 'panchayat' members and the community people, children are approached in their homes and brought out to learn and play in their own community centres / barat Ghars. This approach has fulfilled the much wider gap between the community and the formal school system.

The village community centers which echoed with sounds of laughter only during the village functions or marriage celebrations have now become the lifeline for the community people. The fearless, giggling faces of contended children are a testimony to this change. Besides an access to an open and safe place, the children have now got an opportunity to study and go to school like their 'privileged' counterparts. They are now getting an opportunity to usher into a responsible and accountable adulthood.

Sadrag aims to synergize its mission: **EACH CHILD - IN SCHOOL** with the needs and demands of the community and local government institutions so that it is left with the role of a facilitator in the end. Ugta Suraj program may be looked at as a successful story of localized solutions and interventions in view of the inherent diversity within the country.

The process of development is complex and complicated. Owing to the partisan and selective development of the regions, Development Model based on community- centric approach is the only solution. The not-for-profit sector is relevant here for its closeness to the grassroots and an honest understanding of the community. It very well understands that the road is long and tardy but the aim is not unachievable.

