

**Chirala**

Local Education Report

**CHILDREN'S DOUBLE BURDEN:  
LIVELIHOOD AND SCHOOLING  
IN A FISHING COMMUNITY**

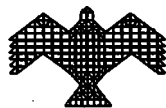


**NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES  
BANGALORE**



*Children's Double Burden:  
Livelihood and Schooling  
in a Fishing Community*

*Local Education Report  
Chirala, Andhra Pradesh*



**NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES**  
Indian Institute of Science Campus  
Bangalore 560 012, India

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2002

**Published by**  
National Institute of Advanced Studies  
Indian Institute of Science Campus  
Bangalore 560 012

**Copies of this report can be ordered from:**

The Controller  
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ISBN 81-87663-30-8

NIAS Special Publication 8-2002

Typeset & Printed by  
Verba Network Services  
139, Cozy Apts., 8th Main, 12th Cross  
Malleswaram, Bangalore 560 003  
Tel.: 334 6692

**This brief report is part of a study on primary education conducted by the Sociology and Social Anthropology Unit at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. Field research was conducted between October 1999 and November 2001 in the following six areas: Jaunpur Block (Uttarakhand), Jaipur (Rajasthan), Khategaon Block (Madhya Pradesh), Bangalore (Karnataka), Tanjavur (Tamil Nadu), and Chirala (Andhra Pradesh). A composite report on all the areas will be available separately.**

**The objectives of this local education report (LER) are to share the findings of the study with members of the communities in which the research was conducted and to generate discussion on issues related to elementary education. Therefore, this report is primarily descriptive of the conditions and problems of schools and schooling. We hope that in each area members of the community, teachers, elected representatives, parents, education department personnel and others interested in promoting elementary education will find the report useful.**

**Khadar Basha (now with GREENS, Ongole) conducted the field research between October 1999 and March 2000. PREPARE provided support**

*Local Education Report - Chirala*

for the second round of study in 2001. Piush Anthony and Dr. C. Upendranadh helped initiate the field study. Sarita Tukaram helped with the second phase of field work and in compiling and writing this report, Savita Sastri processed the data, and Kala Sunder edited the report. Thanks to all of them and special thanks to all the children, both students and those out of school, the principals, teachers, parents and other community members who participated in the study, for their time, patience and inputs.

Support for research was provided by the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) Bangalore and the Spencer Foundation (Chicago). Funds for developing the Local Education Report were provided by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), of the Canadian High Commission, New Delhi.

January 2002

A. R. Vasavi  
NIAS, Bangalore

## **CHILDREN'S DOUBLE BURDEN: LIVELIHOOD AND SCHOOLING IN A FISHING COMMUNITY**

**A**t age ten, Jala Srinaiah is able to articulate the reasons why he needs education but does not attend school. As he puts it, "We need education because during storms fishermen can get lost in the sea and are washed ashore in unknown places. If we can read and write it will help us to inform our families of our safety. We only know fishing. I can identify more than fifty types of fish and I know all about boats and the sea. But at present fishing has declined, so it is difficult for us to find work. We do not know how to do anything else. If we were educated we could have found a job in the ice factory and got a monthly income. Apart from the problem of decline in fishing, we have also borrowed huge sums of money from moneylenders at high rates of interest to buy boats. But the person who promised to buy the boats has cheated us. So we have neither boats nor money. We now owe huge sums of money to the moneylender. To be able to repay that amount every member of the family has to earn. So there is no money to go to school."

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

This commentary by a ten-year-old summarises the multiple disadvantages and tensions that a child from the socially marginal, economically poor, and politically disempowered community of fishers experiences in terms of the lack of opportunities for education. The disadvantages are the inability of the community to sustain itself on its traditional occupation and the inability to send its children to school. In addition, every family has to make a choice: should the children acquire the family's and community's occupation-based knowledge or the knowledge imparted by the school? Many children facing this dilemma and these disadvantages voice opinions similar to those of Jala Srinaiiah; they want to be educated and lead a new life and are bitter about being unable to do so.

Such conditions call attention to the ways in which State-based programmes, even when they are focused on enabling mass schooling, overlook the specific requirements of marginal communities. For example, the State in Andhra Pradesh has, since 1989, developed and attempted to implement several new programmes that seek to improve literacy and schooling levels. Some of the programmes have aimed to provide more incentives, improve the infrastructure, encourage greater participation by the people and introduce new teacher training modules<sup>1</sup>. However, all these schemes and policies have overlooked

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<sup>1</sup> The APPEP was initiated in 1989 and focused on improving the quality of teaching in primary schools. Teacher training, construction of classrooms and provisioning of consumable materials to all schools were the major activities of the programme. Prakasam district was part of the DPEP II phase initiated in 1996. For the block as a whole, DPEP has made considerable contributions. For example, in Chirala, the DPEP has provided 313 new schools, 151 alternative schools, a magazine called CHADUVU for teachers, and has initiated the establishment of the School Vidya Committees (which have replaced the Village Education Committees).



### *Children's Double Burden*

the very marginal and the poor, such as the fishing community, and the very specific disadvantages that children in these communities suffer from. In this case, a fishing community, whose economic lifeline has been eroded, experiences the double-edged problem of losing its autonomy and at the same time, being marginalised in the dominant system. As a result, all the disadvantages, including education deprivation, are reproduced and the community's children are the most vulnerable victims.

### CHIRALA MANDAL, PRAKASAM DISTRICT

Formed in 1970 out of the districts of Guntur, Nellore and Kurnool, Prakasam district is in the coastal region of Andhra Pradesh. While the coastal Andhra region is considered to be very fertile and productive in general, Prakasam district lies in the upland tract and has been identified as drought-prone. Normal rainfall in this district is only 752 mm compared to 925 mm for the State as a whole. Prakasam district has only 29 per cent of its geographical area under agriculture<sup>2</sup>. Since a high proportion of the people are landless, they resort to different survival strategies, including migration to other regions. With a coastal belt of 102 kilometres, the region is cyclone-prone and this adds to the continuous degradation of the region.

While Chirala is a fairly large cotton processing centre and market for cotton clothes, there are only two large private industries in the area,

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<sup>2</sup> *Child Labour in Slate Industry of Markapur in the Wake of Legislation*. R Vidyasagar, K Suman Chandra, Y Gangi Reddy. NLI Research Studies, Series No. 012/2000. V. V. Giri Labour Institute. New Delhi. 2000.

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

one of which is a tobacco company that employs a limited number of people. Agricultural development in the region is uneven with large stretches of semi-arid land and pockets of lucrative commercial agriculture. Given this condition of agrarian underdevelopment, decline in the fishing industry and inadequate industrialisation, Chirala Mandal is an underdeveloped region of the district. This has prompted the government to consider establishing a new ship-breaking yard<sup>3</sup> in the Vadarevu area of Chirala.

### **LITERACY LEVELS AND STATUS OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN PRAKASAM DISTRICT**

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Literacy levels for the district indicate an improvement since 1991. While the overall adult literacy level in 1991 was only 40 percent (53 per cent for men and 27 per cent for women), it is currently (in 2001) 57 per cent (69 per cent for men and 45 per cent for women). With a gender difference of 24 per cent, the literacy levels for women are still low. Thanks to the initiation of at least two major programmes, the APPEP and the DPEP, school infrastructure and enrolment levels have recorded significant improvement in the district as a whole. Although the DPEP data which record very high (near 95 per cent) enrolment and attendance rates are not fully accurate or reliable (given the extent to which these figures are subject to exaggeration at the school and district levels), it is indeed true that the demand for education and awareness among people from all sections of society

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<sup>3</sup> The plans have become a contentious issue and there are several groups who are opposing the construction of the yard on the basis that this will lead to pollution in the area.

### *Children's Double Burden*

is high. Though the number of schools has increased, and almost all settlements now have schools, there are still problems related to teacher-pupil ratios and to the gap between the number of primary schools and middle and high schools. The teacher-pupil ratio is higher in Prakasam district at 1: 54 in primary schools and 1: 44 in the upper primary schools. These differences indicate high dropout rates after primary school with subsequent integration of the dropouts into conditions of child labour.<sup>4</sup>

### **FISHING COMMUNITIES**

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There are 49 fishing villages in Prakasam district, the largest number in the state, with an approximate population of 67,550<sup>5</sup>. Most people in these villages belong to the Pattaparu or Pattapu, Pallikarulu and Vadabalgi *jatis* of the fishing communities. All of these are notified as backward castes (BC). While the Vadabalgi and Pallikaru are Telugu speakers, the Pattaparu are immigrants from Tamil Nadu and speak a mixture of Tamil and Telugu. The Vadabalgi are also migrants to the area and consider the Chirala region as a temporary home.

A survey conducted in 1999 by PREPARE, an NGO working with fishing communities, in the three mandals of Chirala, Vettapalem and Chinnaganjam of Prakasam district put the total population at 30,448. Of this, 62 per cent were fishermen, 18 per cent were Yanadhis and

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<sup>4</sup> *Child Labour in State Industry of Markapur in the Wake of Legislation*. R. Vidyasagar, K. Suman Chandra, Y. Gangi Reddy. NLI Research Studies, Series No. 012/2000. V. V. Giri Labour Institute. New Delhi. 2000.

<sup>5</sup> *Child Labour, Health and Education: A Study on Children residing near aquaculture units in Andhra Pradesh*. P. V. Chalapati Rao and P. Mahapatra. UNICEF. Hyderabad. 2000.

*Local Education Report - Chirala*

19 per cent belonged to other communities. All the fishing communities are classified as "backward castes", and together with some other groups, they account for 70 per cent of the people in the villages being from the backward castes. Nineteen per cent were from SC and ST castes, while 10 per cent were from forward or other caste groups. The study also highlighted that 75 per cent of the population were non-literate, 9.6 per cent could sign and 15.19 per cent were literate.

**DECLINING ECONOMY:** Fishing used to be the primary and adequate source of livelihood for the fishing community, but there have been substantial changes since the mid-1990s. For one, economic liberalisation saw the introduction of mechanised trawlers, which led to a significant decrease in the fish stocks in the region. New aquaculture farms, in which prawns were bred primarily for export, led not only to ecological degradation of the area but also induced many from the fishing community to become wage workers on these farms. With the subsequent ban on aquaculture, the farms lie deserted but the ecological degradation of the land and the pollution of the coastal belt have led to a decline in fish stocks. Government programmes to plant casuarina trees as a protection belt against the impact of cyclones has led to the loss of the fishing community's "SriKrishna land" (land between the sea and the agricultural belt of the region) and to several litigations among the people over the use and loss of the lands.

In addition, the new regulations initiated by the government to help regenerate the sea's fish resources prohibit fishing during the fish breeding months of April and May. With several other months being

### *Children's Double Burden*

a lean period, the fishing community is able to fish successfully for only two months of the year. As a result, they are compelled to migrate to other fishing areas or to seek employment in other regions. Migrating (or going on *desba*) in search of work is a widespread practice and accounts for the high levels of absenteeism among school-going children, who often accompany their parents.

The decline in fishing as a source of livelihood is also leading to a diversification in the occupational and work patterns of the fishing community. While many men are forced to take up wage work as coolies in the towns or as agricultural labourers, the women and children are increasingly being integrated into the agricultural labour force in the region. Many women now hire themselves out as workers especially in the sowing and harvesting seasons. Children subsequently follow their parents.

### **COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS**

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**Panchayat and Kapu System:** The Pattapu have a system of hereditary community leadership.

The head of a settlement or a collection of families is called the kapu. He is assisted by two other Kapus. One is designated as the assistant Kapu and the other is the messenger, called the Sannidi. The Kapu is concerned primarily with settling internal and inter-village disputes and officiates as the ritual head in the performance of rituals and during social transactions within the community. Women are excluded from becoming Kapus and are not involved in any decision-making

*Local Education Report - Chirala*

process. Until recently, they were not permitted to enter the village temple. Because of the strong hold of the Kapu system within the community, the government-promoted Panchayat system remains an externally-driven agenda with little or no meaning for the Pattapu. Further, the marginal economic status and physical isolation of most of the fishing settlements has led to their exclusion from active participation in Panchayats. The result of such exclusion is evident in the fact that the Pattapu settlements have received little or no benefits from decentralised development funds and also remain marginal to the political interests and ambitions of politicians. This alienation from the Panchayat system is also evident in the Kapu's and parents' indifference towards the functioning of the Panchayat and to school-related issues. The Kapu and the other parents have never discussed school-related problems with the Panchayat or with the village schoolteacher.

Membership in non-traditional and new organisations is minimal among the fishing community. Though some NGOs have been organising self-help groups and income generation activities in the fishing settlements, the community's right to a range of institutions and resources remains limited. Mahila Mandals are active in some of the settlements and the one in Ramchandrapura village has been relatively successful in enabling women to address some problems. For example, the head of the Mahila Mandal in Ramchandrapura said they worked to get the schoolteacher changed because the children complained that he was not good. Currently there are two dedicated teachers and the school is running well. The Mandal also helped in matters of money - in getting loans from moneylenders and in helping

### *Children's Double Burden*

borrowers settle their debts. Although the *Janmabhoomi* programme, initiated by the State, is supposedly being implemented in the area, the fishing community is not actively involved.

### **SOCIALISATION OF CHILDREN AND THE TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE**

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The fishing community's close integration with its traditional or customary form of livelihood has impacted on the ways in which children are socialised and trained in the traditional knowledge and skills of the community. Children, both boys and girls, are involved in various tasks related to fishing. Boys accompany fathers and uncles on fishing trips and are taught about the sea, the varieties of fish, their breeding patterns, and fishing methods. In addition, boys are also taught about boats and nets, and how to maintain and repair them. As a result of such intensive training, many boys, especially, are articulate about fishing and the current problems related to it. Girls assist their mothers in collecting, drying and selling fish, and are thus integrated into the traditional livelihood. But they are not exposed to knowledge related to the actual fishing process. However, girls are expected to be good housekeepers and parents place a lot of importance on the ability of girls to manage households well.

### **GENDER RELATIONS AND GIRLS' EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY**

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The lower literacy levels among adult women and the fact that a larger proportion of girls are out of school can be linked to the

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

generally low social and ritual status that girls and women occupy in the culture of the fishing communities. Among the Pattapu, girls and women are not permitted to participate in most of the religious rites and face strictures if such taboos are violated. Though remarriage on divorce or death of the spouse is allowed for both men and women, women are expelled from the natal *jati* if they marry outside the *jati* unit. But women from other *jatis* are integrated into the husband's *jati* and men do not face any strictures for marrying outside the *jati*. Such ritual and social differences are reinforced in the community's organisational and power structure. Women are not eligible to hold the Kapu positions though the decisions of the male Kapu are binding on them.

Marriage and household structures are based on independent conjugal units and after marriage, the newly-married couple sets up home separately, away from their parents. In order to fulfil this responsibility, girls are trained from a very young age to cook and keep house. As a result, where girls are concerned, parents place priority on learning housework rather than on formal education.

Several people, especially the women, complained that dowry (*Katnam*, or *Katnalu*) practices had spread among them and the amounts had increased. While the practice did not exist earlier, it was now considered impossible to get a girl married without dowry. Rates ranged from Rs. 5000 to 50,000. However, the amount was always put in a joint account of the newly-married couple.



### *Children's Double Burden*

#### **EDUCATION AWARENESS AND ORGANISATION**

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The fishing community is sharply divided over education and its implications. While a majority of adults reject the usefulness of formal schooling and education for the fishing community, others, especially the women, believe that education is important in the context of the decline in fishing. The neglect of education can probably be attributed to the importance placed on fishing as the source not only of livelihood but also of identity and self-worth. Further, linking education to employment, several adults observed that it is difficult for poor people to get jobs. Many adults noted that even after acquiring basic education, their children would have to return to fishing and hence the years spent studying in school are a waste.

Such differences in attitudes and organisation for education were observed in two fishing settlements near Chirala. While the community in Ramchandrapura displayed some awareness of the poor quality of schooling in their village, the people of Rudramapura seemed less concerned about the dismal enrolment and retention rates. The school in Rudramapura was established 25 years ago and is a one-room building which houses 30 children studying in different classes. The school's only master teaches all the children in the same room, at the same time. When we visited the school<sup>6</sup>, of the 43 children enrolled, only 23 were present. During school hours, many children are engaged in other tasks - girls help out at home while the boys assist their fathers in repairing nets. However a number of boys from this village

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<sup>6</sup> February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

study and live in hostels in different mandals. Children, especially boys, echo their parents' views on why accessing education is difficult for the fishing community. As Chokka Babu, a 10-year-old boy said: "Education is not for our community. We cannot afford Rs. 50,000 to get jobs later. If we invest the same amount in buying nets, we can at least recover it through fishing." But there are a few who consider education to be of use even in the context of retaining fishing as a livelihood. Voicing this, Mogilapalli Durgamma, an 11-year-old girl, said: "Education is essential because it helps us to write down the number of the mechanised boats that damage our fishing nets. If they damage our nets, we can take down the number and get compensation from the owner of the boat".

### **STUDY**

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In an effort to learn more about the actual conditions of education deprivation among the fishing community, we selected one Panchayat with a predominant number of fishing families, for a detailed study. The field researcher, Khadar Basha, interviewed several families - the parents, children, both school-going and those out of school, teachers, Panchayat members and personnel from the education department<sup>7</sup>. The following is a summary of the findings of the study.

Vadarevu Panchayat is situated in Vettapalem *mandal*, or block, and is by the sea. It consists of two hamlets; one is Vadarevu, which is on the beach itself and consists primarily of about 750 Vadabalji

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<sup>7</sup> The study consisted of participant observation, interviews, questionnaires and observation of classroom transactions.

### *Children's Double Burden*

and Pallekaru fishing families who live in thatched huts built close together. A little away and on the main road, is the second hamlet, Keerthivari Palem, which consists of about 525 families of mixed caste groups, with Yadava families<sup>8</sup>, who are primarily agriculturists, predominating. The household survey conducted in these two hamlets indicates that most of the households consist of nuclear families with an average size of 5.78 persons per family. Literacy levels in the settlement are quite low: 26 per cent of the women are literate, while 40 per cent can sign and the rest are non-literate, among the men 48 per cent are literate, while 16 per cent can sign and the rest are non-literate. Though the area houses a predominantly fishing community, the president of the Panchayat is from the Yadava community. As in many of the fishing settlements of the area, the Vadabalji and the Pallekaru are not actively involved in the Panchayat system.

Dwindling fish reserves have led to the decline of fishing as the primary occupation or livelihood of the people and many households are in a state of pauperisation. As a result, there is diversification of occupations within the households. As only some men are willing to work in non-fishing occupations as agricultural labourers or as workers in the nearby towns. The women and children are increasingly resorting to agricultural labour in order to sustain the household.

Despite severe economic distress, none of the families has resorted to taking loans for their children's education. The missionary school.

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<sup>8</sup> Other families in this hamlet are: Reddys, Madigas, Yerukulas, Setrys, Brahmims and a few Muslims.

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

which provides not only clothes and textbooks, but also two meals to the children, was accessed by many of the very poor fishing families.

### ACCESS TO SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLING CONDITIONS

There are four schools in the vicinity of this Panchayat, which the children of the area attend.

**1) Backward Caste Boys Hostel and School:** A school-cum-hostel established by the State government is only for boys from the fishing community. Though the hostel can accommodate 50 boys and provide schooling up to Standard V, the facilities are inadequate. There is only one classroom and that is rented. Therefore all classes are held in the open, under the trees and the children eat their meals in the open.

**2) Mission School:** This school, established and run with support from international Christian missionaries, has classes from Std. I to X and is located in Adavi Palli, which is two kilometres from Vadarevu. It caters primarily to children from the fishing communities, and provides them with a free meal, textbooks, and clothes. Compared to the government schools in the vicinity, it has better facilities and functions regularly. Therefore, the enrolment level, especially in the lower classes, is high. Despite the incentives provided by the school, the dropout rate after Standard IV is high. Of the 1110 children enrolled in the school in 1999, a majority were in the primary school with only 42 (3.78 per cent) in the high school. One of the reasons for the high dropout rate is probably the fact that the medium of instruction is English. As first-generation learners, who also have a

### *Children's Double Burden*

heavy load of domestic and household economy chores to perform, many of the children find it difficult to follow the lessons. Many of the parents in Vadarevu note that the school provides substantial support to them and their children. In fact, 44 per cent of the parents in the Vadarevu area noted that they were able to send their children to school only due to the support of the organisation that had established and was maintaining the school. This also accounts for the fact that many of the children who are in the lower classes have been moved here from the Vadarevu Mandal Praja Parishat (MPP) school.

**3) Keerthivaripalem MPP school:** This MPP school is located in the Keerthivaripalem hamlet which consists primarily of Yadavas. The school has an enrolment of 125 in Standards I to V. The infrastructure of the school is inadequate with only one room for all the classes and a verandah converted into a classroom. Although three teachers are assigned to the school, there has been a substantial decline in the enrolment levels. The Panchayat president attributes this to the fact that new "convent" and English medium schools have been established in Chirala town and many parents from the non-fishing community opt to send their children there.

**4) Vadarevu MPP School:** The dilapidated building of the government primary school at Vadarevu represents the kind of basic education opportunities available to the children in the area. The roof is on the verge of collapse and the school lacks toilets and drinking water. Not only is the school, with its three rooms, inadequate for the children, its dismal functioning actively discourages children from attending school. The enrolment was 223 students in Stds. I - V in 2000 and four teachers were assigned to the school.

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

Since a majority of children from the fishing hamlet of Vadarevu attend this school and it is closest to the hamlet, we chose to study it in detail, especially its functioning and its relationship with the students and their families.

#### **FUNCTIONING OF THE SCHOOL**

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Although the school has been functioning since the late 1940s, the demand for the school among the fishing community has not been even. The enrolment pattern is highly skewed with most of the children concentrated in the lower classes. For example, in 2000, out of 223 children, there were 143 (or 64 per cent) in Standard I alone. While such figures do reflect the new demand for schools and increase in enrolment, they also reflect the fact that a significant proportion of children drop out of school by Std. III. Enrolment levels indicate that there were only 40 children in Std. II, 19 students in Std. III, and 11 and 10 students in Stds. IV and V, respectively. Such an enrolment pattern forces the headmistress to assign two teachers to Std. I and as a result, the other two teachers are assigned two classes each. These multi-grade classes, in turn, are problematic as the teachers are unable to cater to the differing requirements of two separate classes.

In addition, absenteeism among teachers is high and the teachers inevitably club classes together. The researcher, Basha, noted such chaotic conditions in the period during which the school was studied (October 1999-April 2000). Not only were most of the teachers unable to engage the children fully, but they were also unable to manage

### *Children's Double Burden*

them. Such dysfunctionality largely accounts for the fact that the parents are disillusioned with the functioning of the school and many are interested in enrolling their children elsewhere. In fact, in 1999, only two children passed Std. V and joined the high school in the nearby village.

Attendance levels also tend to fluctuate sharply. While on an average, only 50-60 per cent of the children attend the school, the fishing season and the festival periods see a sharp dip in attendance. Attendance is particularly low in the month of February, the time for a festival (Shankaramanu) among the Vadabalji, when they migrate to the East Godavari region, which is their ancestral area. But the school does not recognise this and continues to conduct classes during this period, which the children miss.

### **TEACHERS' PROBLEMS**

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While all the teachers noted that they had opted for this profession willingly, they seemed disillusioned with the overall structure within which they had to function. All the teachers noted that the biggest problem was teaching multi-grade classes in conditions of inadequate space and lack of teaching-learning aids. They also cited the recent increase in non-teaching duties and responsibilities. Not only did the headmaster or headmistress have to maintain the regular school records, they were also expected to maintain a record of receipt of grains, and of the proceedings of the Vidya Samiti meetings. The headmistress noted that the *Janmabhoomi* programme, under which members of the community or students from the local colleges were

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

expected to help with development work in the villages, took up most of their time and they were unable to pay attention to the children.

While teachers do not have problems of accommodation or commuting as they all reside in the town, they speak of a lack of support from the local education administration and from the Panchayat and parents. The teachers point to the dilapidated school building as proof that their requests for renovating or upgrading the building have gone unheeded.

### **TEACHERS' ATTITUDES**

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A majority of the teachers had Bachelor's degrees and have completed teacher training courses. While their grievances regarding the conditions in which they function were genuine, their attitudes are not conducive to developing a congenial working environment. In fact, an important reason why they are not able to address school-related problems collectively or individually is their indifference and lack of co-operation among themselves. While the headmistress is a middle-aged lady, the two other teachers are younger males who are in their mid-twenties and early thirties. The younger teachers have no respect for the headmistress and there seems to be animosity among them. They blame one another and fail to take individual or collective responsibility for the functioning of the school, its condition, and the education of the children. For example, discussing the functioning of the Vidya Samiti, one of the teachers says: "It is the responsibility of the head teacher to call and organise the Vidya Samiti but she does not do it. Why should we? It is not my business. The Vidya Samiti has



### *Children's Double Burden*

not met and has made no contribution to the school. The school building has not been repaired. The MEO (Mandal Education Officer) has asked us to take classes under the trees but the headmistress continues to hold classes inside the rooms. The tiled roof is on the verge of collapsing as ants have eaten into the wooden beams”.

This teacher's indifference to the functioning and well-being of the school is compounded by the fact that he is seen by many of the parents and the other teachers as a slack teacher who rarely takes the trouble to teach. On our visit to the school<sup>9</sup>, we found him sleeping at the desk. In our interviews with the children, many said they were afraid of him as he often beat them. Yet, the headmistress had not taken the teacher to task nor had his laxity been reported to the higher authorities. While the other male teacher was enthusiastic and interested in teaching the children, he was often marginalised as he was new to the school and was appointed as a para teacher. Citing a stressful working environment, this teacher said he was unable to introduce and do full justice to the new teaching-learning methods that he was interested in.

Teachers also cited high student absenteeism and high detention rates as reasons why teaching was difficult. As many of the children migrate with their parents, attendance is erratic and the learning levels among the students are uneven. This leads to students lagging behind in class and losing interest in school. Since learning levels are low, teachers

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<sup>9</sup> February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2001

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

are forced to detain children in the same class and this results in overcrowded classrooms.

## SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

According to the rules, all schools are supposed to hold regular parent-teacher meetings and since the introduction of the DPEP scheme, all schools are supposed to have a *Vidya Samiti*<sup>10</sup>, in which the president of the Panchayat, the headmaster or headmistress, a volunteer from the area and some parents are members. Both parent-teacher and *Vidya Samiti* meetings are rarely held and few parents even know about their existence. Though the Sarpanch or president of the Panchayat visits the school occasionally, the *Vidya Samiti* in this school is largely dysfunctional. As one of the teachers noted, the Vidya Samiti's volunteer is the Sarpanch's daughter and she is not interested in the school. The headmistress complained that the Vidya Samiti and the Panchayat did not play any role in helping or improving schools.

Since none of the teachers were from the fishing community, there was a sense of social distance between them and the students. While some of the teachers acknowledged the fact that a significant proportion of the students were also burdened with domestic and economic work, they did not know the details of their living conditions or the social and cultural practices of the fishing community. This lack of empathy and support for these children largely stemmed from the

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<sup>10</sup> The *Vidya Samiti* replaced the Village Education Committee (VEC) that had been formulated by the DPEP. Though the VS is a scheme proposed by the State Government, it is similar in orientation (to involve community members in the functioning of schools) to the VEC.

### *Children's Double Burden*

distance that the teachers maintained between themselves and the community. In fact, only 28 per cent of the children said that a teacher had visited their homes. Most of these visits were also for the purpose of conducting the survey linked to the *Janmabhoomi* scheme.

Teacher indifference is also evident in the fact that none of them has made a concerted effort to reach out to the children and to enroll or re-enroll them. In fact, the shortage of school space has led to a situation where many children above the age of six are not enrolled in school. In fact, one of the most poignant moments during our fieldwork was when several children in Vadarevu followed us, in the belief that we would have them admitted or re-admitted to school.

### **COMMUNITY-SCHOOL RELATIONS**

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Despite the fact that the government school was situated close to the settlement, most parents seemed diffident and reluctant to take up issues related to the education of their children. A primary reason for such reluctance was the fact that most of the parents, who were mainly migrant fishers from the Vadabalji community, saw themselves as temporary residents of the area. As one parent observed, "We are only visitors here... we cannot have a say in such matters". In addition, most of them rarely attended the Parent-Teacher Association meetings and many did not know that such an association existed or what its functions were. Only 42 per cent of the parents had visited the school, most had done so not to attend meetings or to enquire about their children, but to "sign the sheet before rice is distributed". Only 20 per cent of the fathers and 17 per cent of the mothers had attended

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

the Parent-Teacher Association meetings. The parents' reluctance to visit the school and enquire about their children was construed by the teachers as indication of lack of interest.

Factors such as these, which prevent many parents and community members from participating in the decentralised structures of school administration, are not taken into consideration. This is important since recent programmes<sup>11</sup>, including the APPEP, have enacted rules and attempted to establish structures through which community members, and therefore parents, are to have a greater role in the management of schools. But without training and orientation programmes, families and communities that are marginal and which wield no economic or political power or have no social status, are unable to ensure that the schoolteachers are accountable to them or to even have the system function adequately. For example, the enforced elimination of the children's names from the register and the denial of entry to school after prolonged periods of absence were issues that remained unaddressed. That organising for decentralised or community participation in elementary education helps ensure effective functioning of schools is evident in at least six villages that we visited, where there was an excellent rapport between the parents, teachers and the Vidya Samiti members and the parents and the children were satisfied with the school.

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<sup>11</sup>The Andhra Pradesh government has also enacted the AP School Education (Community Participation) Act for participatory management, which envisages increased roles for and support from members of the community.

## *Children's Double Burden*

### TEACHER - STUDENT RELATIONS

All the teachers, barring one, were from upper-caste and middle-class backgrounds. Though the school was located near a fishing settlement, none of the teachers belonged to the fishing community. With social and economic backgrounds that were sharply different from that of the students, the teachers remained distant and aloof from the life conditions of the students and their parents. A number of children attend school during the day and help in fishing activity during after-school hours. Very few schoolteachers seem to understand the burden this places on children. Since most children are working after school, they are unable to study or do their homework, for which they are punished in school. The teachers were not only unsympathetic to the life conditions of the students and the demands on them, they were also insensitive to the fact that most of the children were first-generation learners. Teachers often construed student absenteeism as being due to the laxity of parents and the students' indifference and lack of interest in learning. Teachers maintained a hierarchical and oppressive attitude towards the students and did not engage with them on friendly or supportive terms. This largely accounts for the fact that many students cited the unfriendliness and harshness of the teacher as reasons for being afraid of school.

### CLASSROOM TRANSACTIONS

Though the classrooms had charts and drawings hung or pasted on the walls, on the whole, the classes and the teaching methods in the school were still based on the chalk-and-talk method. The researcher

*Local Education Report - Chirala*

observed the following classroom processes used by all but one of the teachers.

**TEACHING-LEARNING METHODS**

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Though all the teachers had been through the DPEP teacher training programmes, there was little evidence of integration of the new methods. Only one teacher, who was new and relatively young, attempted to use the new child-centred approach by trying to draw children into the discussions and by deliberately making the lessons fun and enjoyable. The other teachers were not keen on the new methods; for one, they considered the new methods unsuitable for teaching such children and secondly, they pointed out that the government did not provide adequate materials and teaching aids which were required for conducting classes with the new methods. As a result, most of the classes were conducted with the teacher dominating the class and using the old method of asking the children to repeat most of the language lessons and writing maths problems on the board.

Though the dialect of the fishing communities is different from mainstream and standard Telugu, there was no evidence of its use in teaching. While children did not complain about problems in comprehending Telugu, many teachers cited this as a reason for the poor performance of students in the class. Yet, they did not take the trouble to explain by using words from the fishing community's dialect.

### *Children's Double Burden*

#### **MODES OF CONTROL**

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**Corporal punishment:** Teachers resorted to corporal punishment to maintain discipline. One of the teachers admitted to beating children to keep them from talking in class. "Only if we beat them do they keep quiet. It is very difficult to maintain discipline in the class without beating them. They will not obey you if you talk to them politely."

The headmistress also admitted to beating the children. She said that it was the only way to discipline them. One student noted that the headmistress beat the children so often that she needed a new stick everyday. The headmistress conceded to resorting to such severe punishment but asserted that this was inevitable as "when one person is handling a class of 40 children from different standards, shouting does not help. They will obey you only if they see the stick."

Teachers also appoint monitors to "take care" of the class while they are away. Usually the "best" student is made the class monitor. The "best" student is described as one who is "good at studies and sports".

#### **CHILDREN'S ASSESSMENT OF THE SCHOOL**

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Everyday life in the school provides few or no interesting and interactive sessions which the children can enjoy. Their favourite school days or experiences are when "the flag was hoisted" and "when we get sweets from the village leaders". The reference is to the celebration of Independence and Republic days when children are given sweets and the flag is hoisted. Of the 68 children who were interviewed, only a few said that they enjoyed classes and had learned something. Most

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

of the children wanted to have a clean school, with colourful charts and with teachers who did not scold or beat them. One child, Gonaboyani Yalamanda, eight years old and exceptionally articulate, described what he thought was the problem with the school. "I like to go to school but I am scared of the teacher. She beats me if I don't write the numbers beyond 50. How can she expect me to write up to 100 when I know only till 50? If she stops beating, I will attend school. I am more intelligent than the rest of the class." That school is a negative experience for many accounts for the fact that a considerable number of children drop-out by the III standard and parents are reluctant to force their children to attend school.

### **PARENTS' ASSESSMENT OF THE SCHOOL**

While most of the parents were not able to assess the school in terms of the teaching levels or the learning abilities of their children, they were critical about the school's rules regarding children's attendance and the treatment of the children. Parents were most critical about the school's practice of striking a child's name from the register if he or she was absent from the school for a period of time. Parents see this as a way of denying children and their families their right to the monthly quota of three kg of free grains. As one mother observed, "It means a lot for us to receive the three kg of rice every month. And yet, when our children are not regular, the teachers remove their names from the register and we do not get rice." Teachers defend the practice of removing children's names from the register as a means of reducing the overcrowding of classrooms and as a measure to ensure better attendance rates. For parents, many of whom see the



### *Children's Double Burden*

grains scheme as a good incentive to send their children to school, this is a punitive measure that is harsh on them and on the children. While work and a general sense of diffidence and hesitation prevent most parents from engaging with the school and its issues, the teachers failure to encourage their participation and be empathetic to them compounds the distance between the parents and the teachers.

### **OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN**

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A visitor to the Vadarevu fishers' settlement is met by the sight of a large number of children who are out of school. Yet, official data does not acknowledge this. According to the records in the Mandal Education Office, there were only 12 children, between the ages of 6 and 14 years, who were out of school in Vadarevu<sup>12</sup>, in 2001. However, based on a household survey<sup>13</sup>, this study estimates that approximately 20 per cent, that is about 459 children between the ages of 6 and 14, were out of school. Several factors account for the large number of out-of-school children. Detailed interviews conducted with the children and their parents<sup>14</sup> helped identify the following reasons for being out of school.

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<sup>12</sup>Data from the Mandal Education Office, Chirala, February, 2001.

<sup>13</sup>A detailed household survey of all the houses in the settlements could not be conducted. The estimate is based on a random sample of households and discussions with elders of the community.

<sup>14</sup>The survey consisted of identifying out-of-school children and interviewing them and their parents. In Vadarevu, approximately 20 per cent of the children between the ages of 6 and 14 years were out of school. Of this, 14 per cent, or 68 children, were selected for detailed interviews and discussions.

### **NEVER-ENROLLED CHILDREN**

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Thirteen per cent of the children who were interviewed were not enrolled in school. The reasons given by parents for non-enrolment were primarily financial constraints faced by the family. These were typically families that had migrated recently into the area and had not yet stabilised in terms of work and housing conditions, or had experienced sharp declines in the fishing trade. In addition, several families noted that the local school had refused to register their children for lack of space. The children were too young to be sent to the NGO school or to any other school which was not within walking distance.

### **DROPOUTS OR ELIMINATED CHILDREN**

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A significant proportion of children, that is 46 per cent, cited school-related factors as their reason for leaving school. Of these, 85 per cent had attended the Government School while 7.6 per cent had attended the private or NGO School. The school-related reasons cited by children were fear of one or more teachers and not enjoying school. Eight per cent of the dropouts cited ill-treatment by the teacher as the reason for not attending school.

While many parents stated that deletion of a child's name from the school register made the child drop out of school, one mother pointed out the ways in which the school punished children and therefore pushed them out of school.

### *Children's Double Burden*

Mistaking us to be teachers on government work, this mother, a woman of about thirty years with four children, chastised us. "You must be teachers who beat and terrorise our children. You draw salaries and yet do not understand the problems of the children and punish them for being absent for even a few days." After further discussions with her, we understood that her son, who was now 14 years old, had dropped out because he was beaten regularly in school. He had refused to attend school, telling his mother, "I am willing to be killed, but do not send me to school". He had subsequently dropped out of school and his father had then placed him as an apprentice in a fishing boat. Like this mother, many parents noted how punitive the deletion of a child's name from the register was. Not only did such practices ignore the child's integration into the family or household economy, it was doubly punitive in the context of the declining fishing economy, as it withheld the child's share of three kg of rice per month.

### **WITHDRAWN CHILDREN**

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Children were also withdrawn from school to supplement the family's income or to attend to household chores and responsibilities. Forty-one per cent of the children had been withdrawn from school by their parents. Of these girls were withdrawn at an earlier age and class than boys. The reasons parents cited were inability to afford schooling, by which they often meant the opportunity cost to the household. In comparison to the parents of school-going children, many of these parents had very marginal economic positions even within the fishing economy and most were subsisting primarily on agricultural wage

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

labour. Apart from this, the severe economic crunch forced them to integrate their children's contribution to the household economy. These parents also had larger families. In comparison to the average of 5 persons per household, many of them had an average of 6 to 6.5 members in the household. Children were then withdrawn to help look after babies and toddlers at home.

### **CHILDREN AND LABOUR**

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In the household survey, 60 per cent of the children said they were involved in production activities. Of these, a majority were directly involved with the household's or family's economic activities, which were primarily fishing and allied activities. Almost all the children from the fishing community in Vadarevu are associated in some way with the fish trade. Boys work on fishing nets and boats and assist their fathers and older family members on fishing trips. The girls help in loading, collecting, cleaning and marketing fish. Older non-school-going male children accompany their fathers and other elder male family members on fishing trips. The fishing boats are launched at 3 pm and return around 9 am the next day and it is not unusual for children to be away at sea for 36 hours at a stretch. As one of the working children, Chinna Babu, observed, "We have to stay in the sea for hours at a time...sometimes we return only after two days. Our skin gets discoloured. The men are very strict with us". Many children also migrate along with their parents to other areas when there is a decline in the fish catch.

### *Children's Double Burden*

About 15 per cent of the children were formally employed as wage workers during the sowing and harvest seasons. Most out-of-school girls in the Vadarevu area work as agricultural labourers or help in gathering groundnuts during the groundnut-harvesting season. Given the decline of the fishing industry, more children are gradually being inducted into agricultural and service wage labour.

### **BONDED CHILD WORKERS**

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In view of the decline in the economy and the lack of opportunities elsewhere, a system of bonding or pledging children to employers (called *Ryathi*) has gained currency in the region. Parents who are unable to afford the upkeep of children or are in desperate economic straits, resort to pledging their children to employers. In 2000, the pledged amount for working children between the ages of 10 and 14 years was between Rs. 5000 and Rs. 10,000. These children were required to perform a variety of tasks and services. In addition, some parents had apprenticed their children to boat owners, thereby denying them access to schooling and to adequate and fair wages.

Some children, while not directly engaged in planting or harvesting, perform smaller tasks on farms. Children also perform tasks related to salt processing, packing and selling fish or participate in agricultural labour, construction and masonry work. Almost all the older non-school-going children (between the ages of 14 and 18 years) perform agricultural labour during the sowing, transplantation and harvest season, in paddy fields located close to the village. A full day of labour fetches Rs. 50 and half a day Rs. 25.

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

**Work and Health conditions:** Since most children in these villages either help out in fishing or work as agricultural labourers they face several health hazards. As a study on the health conditions of children in the fishing and aquaculture industry noted, such children suffered from chronic energy deficiency. The exposure to damp, moist environments predisposed them to respiratory morbidity. They suffered injuries while using implements, and many were exposed to pesticides and other organic and inorganic substances<sup>15</sup>. In addition, children who help in fishing are exposed to upper respiratory tract diseases and to skin infections.

### **CONCLUSION**

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The children in Chirala *mandal's* fishing communities suffer from the double burden of a declining livelihood and an inadequate schooling system. Under these circumstances, the inability of State policies and programmes to reach out to these children further disadvantages them. In fact, most of the schemes, though developed to cater to the poor and the marginalised, overlook the very context and structures within which these communities function or exist. As a result, the programmes are not only inadequately implemented but also fail to fulfil their mandate of enabling disadvantaged children to access education and enhance their learning experience. The lives and conditions of the children of these fishing communities were once an integral part of the "traditional" or customary forms of livelihood. But

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<sup>15</sup> *Child Labour, Health and Education: A Study on Children residing near aquaculture units in Andhra Pradesh*. P. V. Chalapati Rao and P. Mahapatra. UNICEF, Hyderabad. 2000.

### *Children's Double Burden*

in the context of loss of or decline in these customary forms of livelihood, these children, far from being released, are integrated into alien and new economic relations, on more exploitative and detrimental terms. The growth of bonding or placing children into conditions of labour servitude testifies to this.

While some children do echo their parents views about the questionable value and importance of education, many other children express their desire to study. As several children note eloquently, fishing is a very difficult profession, which involves a lot of hard work without commensurate returns. They wish to study and seek employment outside the fishing trade. Yet, despite this strong impetus for education, a majority of the children in these disadvantaged communities continue to be deprived of education. The result is the double burden that children bear: of being exploited as captive labour and of being denied their right to an adequate and enabling education system.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **I. Enhancing the State's Role in Primary Education**

In order to establish schools as central institutions in a community or society and ensure their stable and effective functioning, it is important to integrate the efforts of the State, society and teachers. No longer can schools and schooling be considered the sole responsibility of either the State or society. A negotiated approach towards mass primary education must include both. Not only must the State allocate more funds for schools, it must also pay more attention to the administration of schools. It is imperative for the State to view education, especially elementary education, as the foundation for more broad-based and durable development. It is important for the State to continue to be a key player in the primary education sector and not consider the market as a viable alternative provider of mass elementary education.

### **II. Strengthening the Decentralised School Administration Structures**

There is an urgent need for decentralised structures, such as the Panchayats and the Vidya Samitis, to be active in issues related to primary education. Training for such structures should be imparted to all members and must include the dissemination of information regarding their right to call for meetings (and not wait for the headmistress or headmaster to do so), to review records, to hold the teachers accountable, etc. Members should be trained to play their roles effectively and not restrict themselves to organising school



### *Children's Double Burden*

programmes on Independence Day and Republic Day. The right of members to inspect and maintain the infrastructure of the school, such as the classroom, compound wall, toilets, drinking water, etc., should be highlighted. In addition, members need to be reoriented more strongly about the need for the entire community to contribute to the development of the school. Members should also be made aware of children's rights and of socio-economic and cultural practices within the community, such as child labour and child marriage, that may keep children out of school. In addition, members and teachers should be trained to lodge complaints and initiate follow-up on issues related to the supply of school items, such as textbooks, grains, and teaching aids. Such training should also provide them with examples of successful models adopted by other schools or areas for stemming the problem of dropouts and for devising practical and feasible solutions.

### **III. School-Community Calendar**

Since the ecological, agricultural, work, and ritual activities of the communities often clash with the school schedule, there is the need to allow for a region-specific school schedule that will fit in with the community's schedule of activities. Children should be allowed to participate in the activities and work of the community and such activities should be seen as enabling the retention of local knowledge forms and identities. To develop such community-specific school calendars, flexibility can be devolved to the block level and block- or district-specific school calendars can be drawn up with the minimum and maximum number of school days specified. Such a community-

*Local Education Report - Chirala*

based schedule will not only prevent high student absenteeism but will also help bridge the gulf between school and community knowledge and work.

**IV. Reorienting Teacher Training**

There is an urgent need to revise teacher training and recruitment policies. Measures and programmes for making the school an attractive place need to focus on enabling teachers to be proactive agents in the education system. Teachers must be made conscious of the need to have a better understanding of the social and cultural backgrounds of parents and children. While teachers are insensitive to the culture and problems of non-literate parents, they seek to be tolerant and understanding of practices such as child marriage, untouchability, bonded labour, etc., which affect the educational opportunities of children. Both training and policies must seek to alter this contradictory attitude. The importance of being sensitive and tolerant towards the culture and personality of parents must be integrated into the teacher training programmes. At the same time, training must emphasise the importance of not accepting as legitimate and excusable the cultural factors of early marriage, gender bias and parental neglect of schooling, and viewing them as personal factors which teachers cannot address.

A range of new pedagogies and orientation in teacher-student dynamics must be introduced. Ideas such as the superiority of the teacher and the lower standing of students, the need to curb and control children, and corporal punishment are some of the issues which need to be addressed. The recruitment policy can be altered to enhance accountability of teachers to the community and to ensure that

### *Children's Double Burden*

communities receive teachers whom they can trust and respect. Some of the local people suggested that the education department could send teachers on probation to communities for a period of a year. The probationary teacher's appointment to the community school would be validated and regularised at the end of this period only if the community's school committee voted for that person.

#### **V. Local Knowledge and Curriculum Development**

The curriculum should provide for the integration of local knowledge and for greater participation of parents and children in the dissemination of such local knowledge. Several parents are well-versed in a range of local knowledge forms such as a wide array of know-how and skills related to fishing. Among the non-fishing community there is knowledge about forestry, agriculture, folk medicine, etc. Not only can these parents be invited to school to participate in the teaching-learning process, but their role as transferers of knowledge can be enhanced formally.

#### **VI. Improving Supervision and Review of Schools**

The education department needs to play a more proactive and vigilant role. The government schools were not inspected regularly. The education department must regularly inspect the infrastructure of schools, the attendance and activities of teachers, the maintenance of registers and records, and the general functioning of schools. In addition, the department must assess and guide all schools, government and private, on teaching-learning methods, use of new syllabi, treatment of children, and must encourage community-school interaction.

### *Local Education Report - Chirala*

The education department needs to develop a mechanism by which the non-delivery of goods and materials meant for schools can be checked by members of the local elected bodies.

#### **VII. Children's Crisis Fund**

Many children are withdrawn from school when a parent, especially the father, dies or when there is a crisis in the family. Assistance, especially monetary and in kind, should be given to such children to ensure their continued attendance in school. A child-in-distress fund should be available to which all Gram Panchayat members, education committee members, and teachers can apply.

#### **VIII. Block Awards for schools**

One way to sustain standards and quality in schools is to initiate awards for schools at the ward/zonal levels. Schools can be evaluated for their functioning, attendance levels, maintenance of infrastructure, teachers' performance and children's achievement levels. News about these awards can be publicised and they act as mechanisms for establishing quality and standards in schools.

#### **IX. Decentralised Data Collection**

Data and information regarding schools, such as their accessibility, functioning, infrastructure needs, and dropout rate, needs to be stored and held at decentralised levels, such as the block. Allocation of resources, supervision and other support services to the neediest and most deprived areas can be prioritised through these measures. Data on low enrolment and attendance should include details about the socio-economic background of the schools, reasons for low

### *Children's Double Burden*

performance, etc. The data can be updated through six-monthly reviews and inputs from headmasters/headmistresses and from the decentralised administrative structures. Such data should also be available at the school and local levels.

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**This report is based on field research conducted in Chirala, Andhra Pradesh and is part of a study conducted by NIAS in six different states in India. The conditions of schools and experiences of elementary education deprivation among the poor are highlighted in this report.**

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**ISBN 81-87663-30-8**