

India: *Bal Sansad -* *Children's Parliaments*



India: a Children's Parliament in session – attended by members of the local community
From the *Children in Charge for Change Resource Package*

Children in Charge for Change is a Foundation-supported project initiated by the non-governmental organisation Centre for Health Education, Training and Nutrition Awareness (CHETNA – which also means 'awareness' in several Indian languages). Via this project, CHETNA aims to equip and enable children to participate fully and responsibly, not only in development activities, but also in decision making.

This article is drawn from a Resource Package put together by Children in Charge for Change.* It focuses on the Bal Sansad (Children's Parliaments) that have been developed by the Social Work and Research Centre (swrc), Tilonia, Rajasthan. Rajasthan is a semi-arid state in northwestern India. It is one of the country's largest and poorest states, in which over 80 percent of women and 45 percent of men are illiterate. More than half of school age children do not attend school and the majority of these are girls.

swrc is a voluntary organisation, established during the 1970s to work with local village communities in an integrated development process. This covers community development, education for both adults and children, water and sanitation, the preservation of the environment, health, agriculture and effective utilisation of energy. The Bal Sansad are for children aged six to 14 years of age. The youngest children gain experience in democratic processes that are directly linked to their lives and needs; and they develop confidence and skills in participation. This is in preparation for the more formal roles they become eligible for later.

The Bal Sansad were devised with the aim of orienting village children about the political system and at the same time enabling them to participate in matters pertaining directly to their lives, mainly in the field of education. Creating opportunities for children to understand and communicate their needs, and learn about both their rights as equal society members as well as the responsibilities that ensue, prepares them to face the challenges of adulthood as conscious, active citizens. It also presents an opportunity to recognise development priorities thereby putting children in the centre of the development agenda, and linking them to concerns on a wider scale.

Conceptualised in 1991, the programme actually acquired its present shape in 1993 when the first Bal Sansad was elected. However, it is important to understand that this happened following a long process of changing the nature of village schools. Visualising participation as a primary aim, a different system was evolved for schools, based on the philosophy that everyone has something to contribute in teaching as well as the capacity to learn. The traditional environment in which the student is dependent on the teacher was abandoned for one based on mutual communication and interaction.

The objectives of the Bal Sansad were inspired by great value and respect for children's opinions and capabilities. This innovative concept provides students with the opportunity to actively participate in the running of their schools through a democratic process that is above gender, caste, creed or economic situation. This unique exercise helps root education in the local context and builds appropriate and relevant life

India: Children's Parliaments are part of an integrated development programme that includes preschools
photo: Llane Gertsch





skills, teaches children about politics and the electoral process within their own world, retains the interest of the students and enhances their curiosity to learn and to question.

The election processes

The electorate for the Parliament constitutes about 1,750 students between 6 to 14 years of age. Elections to the Bal Sansad and [Legislative Assemblies] take place simultaneously. One Member of Parliament (MP) is elected for every 100-125 children, while each Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) represents 30 to 35 children.

SWRC functionaries adopt the role of the bureaucracy within the Children's Parliament to impart training about how policies are formulated, how the electoral process actually works and the importance for citizens to exercise the critical right to vote.

There are ministers and the portfolios defined for each of them are similar to those of the various units of SWRC: Education; Finance; Home; Industries; Energy; Communications; Environment; Women's Development; Water Resources; etc. The person in charge of each section/unit at the organisational level serves as secretary to the corresponding minister. These linkages facilitate coordination between the Bal Sansad and SWRC and enable the children to understand how the organisation operates. The members of the elected government also act as a critical link between SWRC and the community.

The parliament consists of two parties: Ujala, which means Light with a tree as a logo and Gauval, which means Shepherd, with an elephant as a logo. Names and logos are decided by the children themselves. The candidates opt to be in either party and are then given nomination forms. Time is then given to each party to canvass for its candidates. The election notices are issued by the Election Commissioner.

Once the campaign period ends, the dates for casting of votes are fixed. Ballot papers are printed for the secret ballot system. The SWRC office at Tilonia becomes the central point for the final count of votes. Party representatives are present during the counting process. If any candidate feels dissatisfied with the procedure or has any complaints, s/he has the right to file a written complaint with the Election Commissioner. The party attaining the largest number of elected candidates is invited to form the government. It is not uncommon to observe a winner in the elections pacifying a loser. Contesting on behalf of different parties does not create a rift between children, a common occurrence among adults.

Parliamentary procedures

The parliament holds monthly sessions at different field centres, open for anyone to attend, to review its work and make future plans. If the opposition party finds that the efforts of the majority party are not satisfactory in any area, the issue is raised for discussion. The Prime Minister is accountable to all MPs, who have the right to question her/his decisions.

The decisions taken or the issues raised are recorded by the secretaries of the different ministers, the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader. As a rule, the secretaries must attend all the monthly sessions. If they are irregular in attendance, they could be fined by the MPs. Strict action is also taken against ministers who do not attend the sessions.

A booklet – *Code of conduct and Duties and Responsibilities of Ministers* – guides the work of the ministers. They are expected to talk to the parents of rural working children who are not currently attending night school and convince them of the importance and significance of education and specifically, sending their children to school. They also take attendance every day in the schools, of both children and teachers, and visit four night schools every month. Post-visit discussions are held to answer questions about the teachers, facilities, number of students, etc. Children with more responsibility raise issues such as the installation of hand pumps, construction of school walls and replacement of teachers.

Elected representatives are now expected to attend the meetings of the village committees and their activities, are informed and report on the facilities, especially with regard to health and drinking water, within their village. They have also launched their own magazine – Gwa – which is circulated to all the night schools to keep the children informed of their rights and various local events.

In addition, regular correspondence is maintained between the ministers, members of the Bal Sansad and other children, as it would be strenuous and inconvenient to travel between villages on a daily basis. This communication creates awareness among the children about important issues.

Notable outcomes

One outcome is a widening in children's spheres of interest. It was realised that because the Bal Sansad emerged from the night schools of SWRC, the children's interests and questions tended to remain within the confines of their immediate environment – that is, their school. To enable children to be empowered, it is necessary that they move beyond this limit and relate not only to the overall work of the organisation, but to every aspect of village life. Thus members are now being encouraged to ask questions which relate to their lives.

A second set of outcomes is about the Bal Sansad having direct impact. For example, Leela Devi, Minister for Energy, was unhappy when a liquor shop opened en route to her all-girl school in Puorhitan ki Dhani village. The mothers became uncomfortable sending their daughters to school and the regular attendance of 60 girls dropped drastically. The students held a meeting in the village and convinced the village head to have the shop moved outside the village.

For political reasons, the school in another village was closed. Notwithstanding the inaccessibility of the building, the children continued to hold classes outside the locked doors, on the roadside. When the matter was brought to the attention of the Bal Sansad, it was decided to hold the monthly meeting in this particular village and invite the political representative of the local self government committee, a district board member and the man after whom the village was named, to attend. The district board member promised the children that the school would be reopened and that if it were closed again, he would arrange for the construction of a new building. Not completely satisfied, the children met with the Assistant District Collector, who sent a team to investigate, and the District Commissioner, who promised that she would take the necessary action to prevent the school from being closed. The school remains open.

There are also instances of the Bal Sansad changing attitudes. For example in cases where parents hinder their child's participation in Bal Sansad activities, a mediation team comprising children from both the parties and SWRC members attempt to convince the parents. If they still do not agree, then new elections are held. However, it needs special mention that many traditional and orthodox people of this area of Rajasthan have allowed their daughters to go to the schools and contest elections which are generally considered to be priority areas for boys or men.

Conclusions

An environment of actual parliamentary proceedings is created through which the child is able to experience firsthand the results of true awareness in a democratic process as well as the merits and consequences of responsibility. Through this environment the child is able to draw a link to the adult world and understand and relate to it, maybe for the first time in her/his life, from her/his own perspective. On this level of learning, the child's viewpoint is connected to the larger perspective; and this process irrevocably broadens thought, increases expectations, generates curiosity and creates a feeling of fearlessness among the children. In turn they develop confidence and independence of thought to fervently question; to articulate their views, thoughts, feelings, opinions and desires; and to take decisions.

Overall, there is still a great deal more to be accomplished, which will be possible due to the awareness of the project staff and the fact that they do not turn a blind eye to any innovations suggested by the children or the community and are constantly making efforts to make improvements. ○

** Children in Charge for Change: a resource package; (1998) CHETNA, India*