

Documenting NGO Good Practices

Rehabilitation of children subject to the worst forms of child labor

Case Study of the Bal Ashram

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"Har bachcha ka hai adhikaar -- roti, khel, parhai, pyar" (Every child has a right to food, play, education and love).

"Abhi parenge, sabhi parenge" (We all want education, right now).

These are some of the many Hindi slogans mouthed by the boys of the Bal Ashram, a transitory rehabilitation center for liberated bonded child laborers from marginalized groups, in the Aravali hills of Rajasthan's Jaipur district, 200 kilometers south west of Delhi.

The boys are fond of shouting slogans at the drop of a hat. But do they actually understand what they are saying or do they just parrot what's been taught them? Quizzing them, even the youngest and tiniest of them all – six-year-old Amarlal – produces a big surprise. Each one shows a clear understanding of the slogans: their words may vary, but the essence is the same. Sumedha Kailash, the Ashram's 48-year-old Director, tells us that it does take the boys some time to internalise the difficult concepts that revolve around child rights. "It takes us quite some time to drive the essence through. And, given their backgrounds, they find it hard to believe that they too have any rights and are much slower in accepting these notions than most urban middle-class kids, who take basic things like food, education and play for granted. But, gradually, they do."

1. The Bal Ashram

The Ashram, initiated in 1998 with the active support of organizations such as the Ontario Federation of Labor and the Canadian Auto Workers, is a unique experiment in the emancipation and holistic development of the victims of child servitude. It is run by the South Asian Coalition for Child Servitude (SACCS), a Delhi-based network of NGOs and a pioneering Indian civil society initiative, which has been fighting child slavery and child labor since 1980. SACCS and Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA)² have, to date, liberated over 55,000 children from slavery and given them a new life through education, training and rehabilitation.

Although the Ashram is designed to accommodate a 100 children at a time, there are sometimes more than that number: spill-overs from the previous cohort, kept back to complete their acquisition of trade skills.

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² *Bachpan Bachao Andolan* essentially means 'Save the Childhood' Movement. SACCS is the network of NGOs, while BBA comprises individual activists – all working towards the elimination of child servitude.

In their initial days at the Ashram, all boys undergo some training in the basics of literacy and numeracy. Then, those of a younger age who are found to be sufficiently intelligent or interested are admitted to the government school in the village of Sauthana, about a kilometer away from the Ashram. This is done in consultation with the parents, at the beginning of each session. Some parents, however, do not wish to send their boys for more than six months, and these boys are put in the non-formal education section. Boys aged 13/14 years or above are put into vocational training classes right away.

The inmates receiving vocational training and non-formal education stay for an initial period of six months, while the children admitted to the formal school stay over to complete their education. If, after the expiry of the six-month period, it is seen that the boys are not up to the standard or have not fully acquired the skills of the trade they are taught, they stay over for another six months or for as long as they need to be fully equipped vocationally.

At present, there are 109 inmates in the Bal Ashram. Fifteen attending school in Sauthana, 46 in the non-formal education section and 48 in vocational training. The breakdown of the various trades is as follows: painting – 6; screen-printing – 3; tailoring – 13; motor winding/electricity – 7; welding – 8; carpentry – 8 and gardening – 3. Alongside educational and vocational learning, all the boys of the Ashram go through an additional programme of social learning. The structure of the learning procedure is given in Appendix 1.

Once the period in the Ashram is over, the non-formal education boys go back home, where they are admitted to local government-run schools with the help of the BBA activists. These activists also ensure that the boys who are vocationally trained are set up in their respective trades. For example, sewing machines and other implements are procured for the tailoring apprentices either through the government schemes or with the help of the local community. Others are set up in jobs where their newly acquired skills can be utilized.

The Ashram represents a unique way of rehabilitating child laborers, seeking to turn them into capable citizens through a process that simultaneously makes them soldiers in the war against child labor.

2. Child Labor in India

India is said to have the largest number of working children in the world. The official, Government of India, figure for child laborers is 15 million, but the actual number is much higher. According to a 1996 report (quoting ILO and UNICEF sources), the number of child laborers in India might be anywhere between 15 and a 100 million children.

Whether they are sweating in the heat of stone quarries, working in the fields sixteen hours a day, picking rags in city streets, or hidden away as domestic servants, these children endure miserable and difficult lives. They earn little and are abused much. They struggle to make enough to eat and perhaps to help feed their families as well. They do not go to school; more than half of them will never acquire basic literacy. Many of them have been working since the age of four or five, and by the time they

reach adulthood they may be irrevocably sick or deformed – they will certainly be exhausted, old men and women by the age of forty, likely to be dead by fifty.³

Over the years, child labor has been attributed to illiteracy, poverty and lack of awareness. Impassioned pleas are made for its abolition, but there seems to be little discussion on the alternatives or on what needs to be done to control its growth. While there is unanimity in the declarations that child labor should be abolished, opinions differ about how this should be done.⁴

Many of these laborers are bonded and most of them belong to the underprivileged, marginalized sectors – the Scheduled Castes (SC), the Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the nomadic groups. Very little attention has been given to what should be done with freed bonded child laborers and how they should be rehabilitated. What scant discourse exists, stresses curative rather than preventive aspects; which, apart from mouthing the rhetoric that schooling will solve problems, are not seriously discussed. Universal primary schooling would indeed be a solution, and numerous studies have shown that the demand for schooling has risen markedly in the last decade. However, thanks to a reluctant state, primary schooling is beset with a plethora of supply-side problems, from non-existent schools in village after village to truant teachers, leave alone socially irrelevant syllabi.

The extreme poverty of the *Dalits* or the SCs (the lowest group in the traditional caste system) and the *Adivasis* or the STs (the tribals or indigenous people) makes them the most vulnerable groups for exploitation. Approximately 90 percent of all bonded laborers in India are SCs and STs. Their absolute level of poverty, accompanied by the lack of social welfare, education or alternatives and perpetuated by internal colonisation, deprives them of access to all resources (including the natural resource base). This leaves them vulnerable ultimately, to being tapped as a source of cheap labor; a form of labor 'mining', so to speak, which places them on the margins of bare physical survival.

This is not to say that child labor is a consequence of poverty. It is indeed a myth that parents with no security except the hope that children will care for them in old age have large families, and that 'more hands means more incomes' fuels the population growth that perpetuates child labor. To adhere to such notions is to deny the politics of power leading to child labor. Child labor itself generates poverty and leads to the proliferation of the desperately poor and the number of children in servitude. Each generation of poverty-stricken, illiterate child laborers becomes the next generation of poor, illiterate and marginalized adults who reproduce the vicious cycle. Thus the argument that child labor cannot be done away with till poverty is eliminated reverses cause and effect and acts as an excuse for perpetuating child labor. Ending child labor is stepping out of poverty: it is not a side benefit of poverty alleviation measures.

Not giving cognisance to this is supporting the perpetuation of grossly unequal power relationships between child workers and their parents on the one hand, and the creditors-cum-employers on the other. The state, also, plays a very important role in this process of the perpetuation of disempowerment of the poor. Instances galore of political and social tolerance of child labor, exhibited primarily in attitudes towards minorities, *Dalits*, tribals and women. At the policy level too, resources and broad-

³ 'The Small Hands of Slavery – Bonded Child Labor in India' – Human Rights Watch Report. September 1996.

⁴ 'Child Labor In India' by Taha Husein, <http://www.india-today.com/today/121997/hard.html>

based development programmes are directed away from these groups to benefit an already-privileged elite.

Fifty-six years of Independence have not really changed the situation much. Social workers in the 1950s would be astounded by stories of feudal landlords declaring that if the *Dalit* children went to school there would be no one to graze the cattle. Today no one would openly make such statements, but the mindset often remains unchanged.

Whilst the child workers and their parents are frequently low caste, illiterate and extremely poor, the creditor-cum-employers are usually higher caste, literate, comparatively wealthy, and powerful members of the community. Often, these creditors/employers are the only moneylenders around and are extremely influential. They are also frequently connected, by caste and by the social and political hierarchy of the community, with local officials, including police officers, factory inspectors, and other local authorities that might normally be expected to safeguard the rights of children.⁵

The end result of all this is debt, servitude and bondage, including that of the children. Most are put into bondage in exchange for comparatively small sums of money: something as paltry as two thousand rupees, equal to about forty-one US dollars, which is the average amount 'loaned' in exchange for a child's labor.

The practice of child debt servitude has been illegal in India since 1933, when the Children (Pledging of Labor) Act was enacted. Since 1947, a surfeit of additional protective legislation has been put in place. Most important of all, for children in servitude, is the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, 1976, which strictly outlaws all forms of debt bondage and forced labor.⁶

These legal safeguards mean little to the parents of children in rural India. They may not be willing to engage their children in labor; but they really have no choice. The vicious nexus of being marginalized, landless and in the grip of local moneylenders inevitably leads to bondedness. Moreover, there is the lack of access to education. Ironically, the children and their parents are often blamed for not being interested in education or not being sufficiently bright to study.

Lack of education facilities is one of the causes of the persistence of child labor. In South Asia, the phenomenon is encouraged by the fact that state expenditure on education is very low. In India it is less than 1.8 percent of the GNP. In many places, even if there are schools, they are ill equipped. In a recent study by CUTS (Center for International Trade, Economics & Environment, Jaipur) on the costs of displacing child labor, it was estimated that between US\$14.6 and 18.9 billion (Rs. 620,500 – 803,250 million) per annum would be needed to send all the 55 million working children to school.⁷

While debates and write-ups are unending and concentrate mostly on how to prevent or eliminate child labor, little thought has been accorded to the 'Here & Now' problem of the children in the labor force today and what should be done about them. For instance, if even 10 percent of the bonded child laborers were to be freed each year,

⁵ SACCS Website; <http://www.saccsweb.org>

⁶ 'The Small Hands of Slavery – Bonded Child Labor in India' – Human Rights Watch Report. September 1996.

⁷ 'Child labor, social clause & the WTO' -- Pradeep S Mehta, The Economics Times. June 16 1999.

does the state have the infrastructure or the political will to rehabilitate these 1.5 million children? It would seem not. In a scenario as bleak as the existing one, what should be done with the millions of child laborers? This reality leads many to argue for the unionisation of the child labor force, but that would not necessarily solve the problem, especially in the countryside. Not only would child rights continue to be denied: it is uncertain what the outcomes would be. Despite the wide existence of trade unions, actualisation of minimum wages and the right to employment for adults remain a distant dream for many in the country. Another option would be the release and rehabilitation of the erstwhile child laborers whilst at the same time ensuring that these children do not get sucked back into the conditions they were liberated from. The relevance of the Bal Ashram intervention has to be seen against this background.

3. Good practices

It must be emphasised that it is essential, in considering good practices for the process of elimination of child labor, to give prime importance to the 'point of view' of the children themselves. That is, given the multifarious actors involved in the process of eradication of child labor, a good practice has primarily to be 'good' from the children's perspective. This is important, for what is a good practice from the child-laborer's point of view would be a 'bad practice' from the adult employer's viewpoint. But that is precisely the point: a good practice in this context has to challenge the status quo of the existing power relations, and in that sense be extremely political. Indeed, a major criterion of good practice in this sense should be whether it poses challenges to the system that creates the problem and if so, how? Does it seek to alter the equations of power? This criterion, in fact, emerges from the analysis of the Bal Ashram intervention and will be discussed subsequently.

In the realm of social interventions, it is widely accepted today that, for a practice to be considered 'good', the intervention should meet the following criteria:

- o Be process oriented;
- o The processes be set up according to the needs of the constituency and also be flexible enough to accommodate varying needs and diversities;
- o The process be participatory and owned by the constituency;
- o The process be open, transparent and equitable;
- o The interventionist be accountable to the constituency; and
- o The intervention be socially sustainable and replicable in terms of principles guiding praxes.

Given the contemporary adult-centricity not just of interventions, but of the very epistemologies, it might seem a tall order to achieve the above criteria, with a constituency primarily of children. This is all the more so given the perceptions of adults regarding what children will understand or not. Most often these perceptions are an apology for 'adultracy', if not an inability to grasp the existential realities of the children.

This study seeks to break out of this by asking the children themselves and judging the realities from their point of view, a point of departure from conventional methodologies informing the research on the subject. Most of the existing research relies on the perceptions of adults and the independent testimonies of the children are never taken into consideration. The children are child laborers but, nonetheless, children and being so, are as much entitled to a right to childhood as any other category of children.

This raises the question as to whether the Bal Ashram, per se, represents good practice, or whether its individual elements are good practices. This forms the subject of this enquiry and the subsequent sections.

4. The Intervention

The boys at the Ashram are from the states of Bihar, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan: most of them belong to the Scheduled Castes, with a sprinkling from the nomadic groups (the *Banjaras*).

The intervention is *process oriented* and the process of exposure, of self-realisation, starts from day one. The Ashram has its own *Bal Panchayat* for governance. Right at the beginning of each new session, the boys decide at the *panchayat*, the allocation of jobs. Various committees are formed with each boy as part of one. They decide and their decisions are respected. The Ashram personnel are there only as observers. For the newcomers, the sense of belonging, of being respected, of having responsibilities, starts right there (see Box 1: A day at the Ashram).

BOX 1: A day at the Ashram

It's not yet daybreak and the Ashram is gradually waking up. Various sounds waft in the air: dogs barking; children's sleepy voices calling out to the dogs; children swarming around in the bathrooms, freshening up and making a din; the strains of *bhairavi* (Hindustani classical morning raga) completing the atmosphere of a blissful morning.

Soon the boys congregate for the morning prayer, then they are out for their daily run around the campus trail; the dogs running beside them, barking; the trainer urging them forward. This is followed by a vigorous half-hour lesson in free hand and yogic exercises, after which the boys disperse for *Shramdaan* (voluntary labor).

Each boy is assigned a task as part of the *Shramdaan* as soon as he comes to the Ashram, depending on his abilities, likings or simply because the work has to be done. This may be working at the vegetable patch, the agricultural farm nearby, watering all the greenery at the campus, helping the cook prepare breakfast and the meals, cleaning up the place or looking after the animals. The various committees include the *safai* (cleaning-up) committee, the kitchen committee, the garden committee and the rest. The *safai* boys clean up all the conceivable parts of the Ashram and are responsible for its cleanliness at all times.

There is great spontaneity in their work and no boy is ever seen lagging, despite the fact that there is no one around to chide or drive them. Says Sumedha, "The first few days at the Ashram, some boys are lacklustre and feel they have to be driven to work, exactly as they were used to, in their 'child labor' days. But, in no time at all, seeing the others, they get the feeling that this is their own place and their own work, and they gradually start taking a lot of pride in it."

What is most striking is the home-like atmosphere. The minute the bell is rung for breakfast or lunch, the boys rush to the serving counter, the geese racing them to it: somehow never bothering the boys while they are eating. But the moment a boy goes to wash up his dish, the geese hover around, loudly screaming for the scraps. For rural boys, it is like 'home', where they live and grow up amongst animals, throwing titbits to them while eating.

On schooldays, breakfast is a hurried affair, as the schoolboys rush off on their kilometer walk to school. They seem to quite enjoy attending school, as no incentives can detain them, and they dislike being late. The others, attending non-formal education classes or trades, go off to their respective sheds and classrooms.

Most of the smaller furniture used in the Ashram are made by the carpentry pupils and the boys also take on a number of outside orders for making furniture, usually from the nearby villages.

The children, although respectful towards their elders, are not scared of or in awe of them. They frolic around with the staff and tease them too. To them, the Director, Sumedha, is not 'madam,' but is endearingly called '*bhabiji*' (elder brother's wife: generally a mother figure in the Indian cosmos). They come to her with all their little problems and grievances. One of them was once seen protesting that she had forgotten to bring pastels and clay for him, despite promising them to him when he had won the painting competition the previous month. Another made the weird request to her to make him a

‘magistrate’, since he had heard that her son had become one, and to him, nothing was impossible for her.

In operational practice, it makes an immense difference to the boys when they see that they are not thrashed or abused for the slightest mistakes; they get to eat in proper quantities. They are shown gentleness, given love from the Ashram personnel and bonhomie from the other inmates. An interest is taken in their welfare and, for the first time in their lives, they start enjoying their childhood. The message that they are human beings and that they matter is inculcated in them.

In addition, for the first time, these boys are shackle-free. There’s a sense of freedom, which is exhilarating in itself and infuses confidence in them. The atmosphere is so informal that the boys feel completely at home – perhaps the ideal home that they had always dreamt of. Although the Ashram has its own discipline, it is never stifling and the boys are allowed small liberties, so long as these don’t hamper the smooth working of the place.

Moreover, they see, in the actual day-to-day running of the Ashram, that the dictum ‘*hum sub ek hain*’ (we are all equal) is always followed. Everyone does everything together – even eating together: not a very common happening in a caste-ridden society, where the Scheduled Castes, to which a majority of these boys belong, have a stratification among themselves too.

During their stay at the Ashram, the boys take an active part in the Bal Mitra Grams (BMG – Child Friendly Villages). The uniqueness of the BMG initiative lies in the active participation of village children in creating legitimate democratic space for themselves in panchayats, communities, schools and families. The initiative is envisaged as a means of solving the deep-rooted problem of child labor and creating a demand and value for good education as a village pride, igniting mass consciousness and using the people’s potential, power and local resources. The BMGs are the true guardians of child rights at the grassroots level. There are, at present, four BMGs in Rajasthan – all in the vicinity of the Bal Ashram.

A corollary to this and another unique aspect of the Ashram is the formation of the Bal Panchayats, where the empowered children of the Ashram in turn help in the empowerment and the involvement of the children of other villages with their respective panchayats, so that these children can put their demands -- for education, rights and the like -- before the people concerned.

The BMGs, with active Bal Panchayats, have worked wonders in various parts of the country, especially in Bihar. Yet not everybody seems to see eye-to-eye about this. Matadin Sharma, the sarpanch of Sauthana, and an inhabitant of village Papri, the first BMG in the locality, about two kilometers from the Ashram, is disgruntled. An active Bal Panchayat in his village has made the youngsters quite audacious, according to him. The Bal Panchayat of Papri had recently taken on the responsibility to see that there was not a single child laborer in Viratnagar, the nearest town. The children have become so conscious now, that they even defied their parents and complained to the personnel of the Ashram about the sarpanch, when he refused to take some of their suggestions into cognisance.

One ritual steadfastly carried out every Sunday at the Ashram is the ‘birthday celebration’ (see Appendix 2). Says Sumedha, “Most of these kids have no idea when

their birthdays are, nor do their parents. Yet, being exposed to TV and films, they too wish there was a day, which could be celebrated as their very own birthday.”

The purpose of the birthday celebrations is two-fold. The first and foremost is, of course, to give the boys a sense of pride in themselves: that they too are important. The boys love it when they are paid so much attention and their assigned birthdays become their own birthdays for the rest of their lives. The other intent, however, is to infuse confidence in them and lead them towards a process of empowerment at a philosophical level.

Cowed, traumatised boys, coming from poverty-stricken, weak, marginalized backgrounds, are told that every human being is equal, irrespective of caste, creed or financial heritage. The essence of unity, organization and fighting for one’s rights is instilled in them – in ways that are far superior to any classroom lessons or lectures.

Although no formal gender sensitization is a part of their curriculum or taught to the boys overtly, yet it is implicitly built into the process that they undergo. Follow-up investigations show that most of the erstwhile inmates have been adamant on school admissions for their sisters. Domestic violence and the abuse of women in the family have also considerably lessened due to their efforts.

All of these factors – together and individually – combine to make the boys what they turn out to be in the longer run: aware, responsible citizens; fighting for their own as well as others’ rights.

This is so visible that Bhumilal Yadav – a farmer, and a member of the ‘Shiksha (education) Committee’ in the government school in Sauthana could not help but remark, “The Ashram boys are courageous. They even stand up to the teachers if they feel something wrong has been done to them. Now, our village schoolboys have gradually started learning from them and they are not afraid to stand up for their rights. Since the Ashram boys feel that they belong to ‘a family’, they always stick together; and now our boys have learnt what loyalty is.”

That *the process is flexible and accommodates varying needs and diversities* is reflected in the fact that the inmates of the Ashram come from various ethnic, linguistic and familial backgrounds. The only commonality is that almost all of them were child laborers and most of them were psychologically traumatised and shattered when they came (see Box 2). A number of them had been bonded laborers.

Box 2: Recovery from abuse

Twelve-year old **Pradeep** was considered ill omened by his natal family, who, on the advice of a mendicant, were about to sacrifice him to the local goddess. Pradeep was saved since the axe, which was about to hack his neck, missed its mark and fell on the back of his scalp instead. Deeming that the goddess did not accept their sacrifice and fearing the legal consequences, the contingent left him there, profusely bleeding, and ran away.

It took Pradeep a long, long time to come out of his trauma. He was ailing when he came to the Ashram. His wound had not healed completely. He had lost the ability to speak and had a deep mistrust of humankind. Medical treatment, sheer loving care and the friendship of the other boys gradually returned him to normalcy after a few months.

Pradeep is extremely attached to Sumedha. He trots after her, snuggles up to her all the while she is at the Ashram and sulks whenever he feels that she is not giving him enough attention. Since he suffers from an inherent insecurity, Pradeep also craves a lot of petting and patting from the other inmates of the Ashram, who ungrudgingly lavish them on him.

Deepak, a 13-year-old orphan, ran away from the thrashings of his master at the hotel where he used to work as an errand boy and fell into the trap of drug-peddlers, who too ill-treated him. "When he came to the Ashram," says Sumedha, "Deepak was absolutely emotionless. He was shy, introvert; he wouldn't speak to anyone nor could he trust anybody. He ate voraciously, all the while thinking that we were out to exploit him too. Otherwise, why should we give him food? It took all of us a long, long time to draw him out of his shell."

Gradually Deepak started learning the alphabet and numerals and proved to be an extremely intelligent boy. He was admitted to grade four within a few months and, the next year, he not only topped the school but secured record marks in the whole *block* (smaller administrative division of a district). Deepak has been regularly topping his classes. He is a good singer, an actor and, now that he knows the people around will not exploit him, he is full of pranks, along with the usual innocence and stubbornness of an adolescent – a perfectly normal child.

There are children with natural leadership qualities, and children in whom this quality has to be honed and whetted. The Bal Panchayat of the Ashram takes care of that by making the boys act as the *sarpanch* (leader) in rotation. A number of boys have been abroad with the Chairperson of SACCS, Kailash Satyarthi – some of them several times – while most of the boys have never even been to the capital city of India. Yet, there does not seem to be a vestige of jealousy amongst them on that score. During an interview on these visits, boys were seen proudly pushing the 'foreign returned' ones forward and even prompting them, with obvious pride on their faces, when the experiences were being related.

Apart from the flexibility of the process, there is something for everybody in the Ashram, even in terms of day-to-day living.

When he came to the Ashram from his village, Ranjeetgarh Bandra in Punjab, 13-year old Soni Singh was upset only on one score. He had had to leave all his animal friends behind. One look at the Ashram, however, lifted his spirits. There were three dogs and two pups – Alsations and Great Danes – along with a gaggle of geese and the place teeming with rabbits tame enough to eat out of one's hand. Now, Soni's part of the *Shramdaan* in the Ashram is to look after the animals.

The very existence of a Bal panchayat at the Ashram makes *the process participatory and owned by the constituency*. The boys decide allocation to the various committees amongst themselves. The kitchen committee not only decides on the menu, but also helps the cook carry it through every day. The panchayat meets once a fortnight, but if there is an urgent matter to be decided or talked about, an emergency meeting is summoned.

Given their backgrounds, most of the boys are ill mannered, abusive and physically dirty when they come to the Ashram. The veteran inmates generally take it on themselves to teach the new ones to be well behaved. If this does not work easily, the general consensus is to send the guilty to Coventry. Social ostracism and peer pressure work wonders in these instances. And all this generally takes place without the intervention of the staff or other personnel of the Ashram.

Chitra Rathod, Project Director of the Zilla Mahila Vikas Adhikaran (District Women's Development Authority – a government body), headquartered in the state capital, Jaipur, says that what struck her most about the place was that the boys were extremely comfortable in their surroundings and did all their own work. They even manage their own mess (kitchen)! The lady, who supervises, monitors and evaluates such refuges, was extremely impressed with the fact that the children at the Ashram seemed to own the place; to them, it was 'their place' and they were immensely proud of it.

"When we come to the Ashram, we feel they are the hosts, and we are the guests here," says Satyarthi. He feels this is because there is less discipline and structure, and more freedom. The children become a part of the process and actually own it. They feel that it is their Ashram. The children sort out the problems of the Ashram themselves: like attending to leaking pipes and chasing animals away from the vegetable patches. If there is a problem, which they cannot handle, an elder is called; but the responsibility is there.

The process is open, transparent and equitable. The boys themselves take most of the decisions regarding the general day-to-day running of the Ashram. All boys are treated equally. There is no favouritism on any account, though some are indulged, by all and sundry, like six-year old Amarlal, the baby of the Ashram; and Pradeep, whose mental faculties are somewhat challenged after the bash in the scalp, making him slightly amnesic at times. The other children, however, are always at hand, gently urging Pradeep to answer correctly, as if his lapses are their personal imperfections; and are quick to point out that this is due to his 'accident' – his condition was worse when he came, but he is showing signs of improvement as the years roll by.

A good practice, however, is not necessarily seen as good practice by those with vested interests.

The powers that be have started to feel threatened by the popularity of the Bal Ashram, deeming that they are out to snatch the votes of the local populace. A damaging smear campaign against the Ashram began some months back. Rumours arose, among them the tale that the Ashram wiles away children from their families, later to sell them abroad. This sense of threat is understandable, apart from the imagined trespassing on the vote bank. The very slogan and philosophy of the Ashram, "*hum sub ek hain*" (we are all equal) has proved extremely ominous to people who thrive on the divisions of religion, caste, and sexual categories and believe in barriers between the rich and the poor.

5. Other facets of the intervention

Almost all mid-way homes run by government and non-governmental organizations impart formal/non-formal education and vocational training to freed child laborers. In most homes, they are taken care of: food, education, uniforms, books and the rest are free. At a cursory level, there does not seem to be much of a difference between the Ashram and these homes, where all are vocationally or educationally equipped.

And yet the hiatus remains. Which mid-way home, along with providing educational and vocational advantages, would emotionally endow and philosophically empower its inmates? Advancing them to learn to live as emancipated, independent beings, fighting for their own and others' rights. And herein lies the **innovativeness** of the venture.

Furthermore, the experiment of building leadership amongst that segment of society, which is generally considered the scum of humanity by the elite, from which the children come, has proven to be extremely successful over the years.

Effectiveness

The intervention so far has not been very effective in terms of the economic rehabilitation of the children in the longer run. This is partly due to the age of the intervention: it is too early to say how the children will develop economically as adults. Further, since they are dependent on government machinery for this, the existing schemes are not easily implemented, despite constant recourse to the courts and government departments.

Apart from that, the programme has proved to be highly effective. The children undergo a process of mental liberation. Some of them have proved to be very effective leaders. Almost all of them effect some change or other in their own households, once they go back. And the biggest achievement is that NO child goes back to bondedness again, ever.

Replicability

The Bal Ashram is a replication in itself, since it started on the same principles and philosophy of the Mukti Ashram in Delhi, another SACCS initiative. The 'Bal Ashray' of the Rugmark Foundation could also be called a replication, since it was formed along the same lines as the Bal Ashram. Yet, though the body is the same, the soul differs. The first thing that anybody experiences in the Bal Ashram is the aura of freedom that the children enjoy. The same could not be said of the Rugmark home. It is more structured, formal and quite stifling in consequence. It can be seen that replication is not blind imitation, what is more crucial being the replication of principles.

Many principles for replication can be derived from this experiment, but the most important one is that rehabilitation of child laborers cannot be devoid of political consciousness of the situation that leads to the problem and the creation of a will to combat it. This begins by an uncompromising adherence to the right to childhood, accompanied by a freedom from fear. In this, the active participation of the children makes a critical difference.

Sustainability

Philosophically, that is at the level of ideas, as well as socially, the venture is indeed sustainable. But at another level, it would not be sustainable without regular funding or financial support from external sources; since it is not possible to mobilise resources from the children, who are the 'beneficiaries' here; or from the parents of the children or from their community, given their backgrounds. The lack of sustained financial flows itself can be a critical flaw, given the myopic project-oriented visions of many donors that leads to a fickleness and a tendency to quantitatively measure all outcomes through mechanistic log-frame analysis.

Perhaps the time has come when the SACCS starts thinking of garnering state resources more effectively. But do so, SACCS would probably need to re-work some of the programmatic structures, including streamlining the criteria of deciding entry to the ashram under changing circumstances and follow ups of those who are sent back home. This is because as its popularity is on the ascendant, there will be demands made to cater to a greater number, perhaps more than the capacity of any such organization.

A positive sign is that, in the years to come, there will be some children from this very place, especially the ones, who have no parents, who will take it over. However, children whose parents are alive have also expressed a spontaneous willingness to stay forever and teach generations of children all the things that have been taught them.

Despite this, the numbers that can be catered for will always be less than the demand, due to constraints of both finance and space. Perhaps the time has come for the SACCS to use the lessons learnt from the Bal Ashram intervention for lobbying and advocacy with the government and other NGOs/CBOs to initiate similar ventures. This would enhance the long-term sustainability of the idea.

Responsiveness to local needs

The intervention responds to local needs by imparting vocational training relevant to the children's villages or in places nearby. Care is taken in assigning boys the most applicable trade: those learning motor rewinding or electrical wiring come from the big villages where there are possibilities for them to open up shops or workshops. Tailoring can be pursued in the remote villages too and, whilst screen-printing and the like are rather sophisticated trades, the boys who are assigned to these have shown a definite aptitude. And, once the trained boys go back and work in their villages, they obviously help in maximising the local resources.

A review of the results demonstrates that the programme is **pragmatic**. An increasing number of the former Ashram boys earning or returning to their studies, along with the prevention of migration due to their efforts (usually with the help of BMG/BBA activists), are definite indicators of this pragmatism.

The most visible results are, however, that each and every child applies something or the other that they have learned at the Ashram. Follow-up cases show that almost all the children have been successful in stopping their fathers and other close relatives from alcohol abuse. A number of them have insisted that their sisters attend school too. Domestic violence and the abuse of women in the family have also substantially reduced. The children progressively imbibe all these lessons at the Ashram. They had been seeing all these ills from the time they were born, not deeming them to be wayward in any manner. Exposure to the Ashram allows its values gradually to penetrate them, making them into changed human beings once they go back.

Cost-effectiveness

At a superficial level, it might seem that imparting basic education to the children at the Ashram is not cost effective. The costs of staff, infrastructure, and management total to much more than in a village school, where, probably, a child would not have even Rs. 50 per month spent on him. In the Bal Ashram, with food and clothing along with all the expenditure enumerated above, about Rs. 1000 (about US\$20) gets spent on each child every month.

This might seem economically unviable: but that is precisely the point. How much should be spent on the real, all-round education of children? Urban middle class parents spend several thousands on their children every month on fees for elite schools, producing citizens who, in the ultimate analysis, perpetuate the inequalities prevalent in society. Against this, Rs. 1000 per month per child is a pittance. Moreover, the small amount actually learned by children in village schools, and the way they are pushed into the workforce after the primary level, are facts which are

well known. The real issue is to oppose the provision of poor quality education to the poor.

In their trade training, the children learn something tangible. Basic education too has to be imparted and, along with the `Three Rs', the children learn skills, which will form the foundation of self-sufficiency and emancipation in their later lives. Such factors cannot be computed quantitatively. They raise important issues that need to be debated at the national level, including that of the budgetary allocation for rural school children. There is no leakage of funds in the Bal-Ashram, every rupee is well spent, so should Rs. 1000 per month not be considered the bare minimum that is necessary for imparting basic life skills to rural children so that they are not pushed into child labor?

The programme's cost effectiveness can be judged from the overall results in terms of social benefits, exemplified by the children's success in motivating others. Money and other resources expended on the children are returned in multiplied and magnified outcomes. The Bal Ashram is, right now, still too new a venture to allow a number of these factors to be assessed in terms of social benefits; but the signs are there. Says Sumedha, "Just see the results five years from now. Already the effects of the ex-inmates of the Ashram are visible in the BMGs. They are all chalked up as future *karyakartas* (activist leaders); they've all become so vociferous on various

The most important facet, however, is the children's confidence, which is visible straightaway. The villagers find incredible the transformation of the cowering child who left the place six months back. And it is the aura of hope that is born in the villagers' minds, seeing these boys, that makes the programme effective outright.

6. Lessons learnt

Many lessons relevant to the praxes of elimination of child labor, as well as the rehabilitation of those freed from servitude, can be derived from the intervention. These lessons can be conceptually categorized under headings of contextualisation, embeddedness and holistic empowerment of child laborers, together with their families and societies.

Contextualisation

Given a deep-rooted understanding of factors relating to the causes, prevention and elimination of child labor, the Bal Ashram intervention has tried to address the `Here & Now' problem in relation to existing child laborers. Without confining themselves to academic debate alone, they have acted. The former child laborers are rehabilitated and given a life of dignity as responsible citizens.

The Bal Ashram has deliberately sent children to the nearest government school, rather than providing these facilities themselves. With the Ashram personnel keeping in close touch with the school authorities; including the `Education Committee' of the school (which consists of villagers from various walks of life, living in the vicinity), a pressure group is built up, whereby the state is forced to deliver better.

Embeddedness

After a stint in most mid-way homes, the inmates are so alienated from their previous surroundings that they find it difficult to adjust to a life they had left behind. At the Ashram, values are imparted to the children that are embedded in their local cultures.

Various social issues like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, population boom, casteism, communalism and superstition are discussed through stories, events, role-plays and pictorial representations. Since a lot of the boys have never been taught moral lessons relating to the ills of lying, cheating, stealing and the rest by their parents or the community – who are too busy desperately trying to survive – the boys are taught these too.

Moreover, learning through cultural activities has proved to be an innovative experiment, which has yielded spectacular results. In order to infuse a sense of pride amongst the inmates, various programmes are organised occasionally keeping in view the national culture and various regional or rural cultures. Inmates are trained in singing folk and patriotic songs as well as slogans. They are also exposed to dance forms of different regions, proving that culture is a great unifier, which helps people to sink their differences and projects a oneness and a sense of unity. This exercise has been found to be extremely helpful, especially for children who have undergone long spells of physical hardship and trauma.

The other programmes like the ‘Education March’ and the ‘Stop Migration Campaign’; the street plays; creation of posters, banners and wall writings; the formation of BMGs to fight against alcoholism, repression, illiteracy and child labor: all these so fill the children with enthusiasm that after completing their education or vocational training, the erstwhile inmates of the Ashram make a point of continuing their studies along with active participation in the developmental works and the social life of the village. By these means, awareness-building against fundamental social evils plays a major role in making the villagers aware of the rights of the child, the importance of education and the rest.

The instance of Ajay Kumar (see Box 3) highlights the fact that, in the end, the venture produces not ‘individuals in isolation’ but ‘individuals with a group concern’. The boys develop a societal concern. Knowing the pathos and indignities of the life of a child laborer, they vow never to let another child be or stay a child laborer again.

Box 3: Developing Local Leadership

A released bonded child laborer from Bihar, **Ajay Kumar** (12), was vocationally trained in the Bal Ashram, where his potential leadership skills were honed.

On returning to his village, he joined the BMG activists in securing school places for all the children in the vicinity. He played a major role in setting up a school in his village, the building being constructed with community participation. He was selected the *sarpanch* of the Bal Panchayat in the BMG, Ramchandranagar, and started an anti-liquor campaign in adjacent villages, reporting each wayward case to the police and the administration, and succeeding in shutting down the liquor vends there. He threatened to fast unto death, to get his habitually drunken father out of the habit.

Along with the other members of the Bal Panchayat, he requested the village sarpanch to arrange the construction of a toilet in the school precincts, procuring an assurance that the matter would be seen to, as a matter of urgency.

Today Ajay symbolises the potential of children and youth in creating change. He, along with his friends, has succeeded in motivating a number of parents - in particular, mothers – and has created an awareness of the need for ‘education for all’. He personally has vowed to work for the total elimination of child labor.

All the children trained in the Ashram learn to live not for the self but for others. A team spirit is born, along with loyalty to the group. As the member of the Education Committee, Bhumlal Yadav, pointed out: seeing the Ashram boys sticking up for one another, the school children of Sauthana have now learnt what loyalty is.

As their cognitive skills are gradually stimulated and sharpened, they learn to draw the connections between social evils and child labor, discovering its causes from the 'Stop Migration Campaign,' which is conducted throughout the flood-affected areas of Bihar. A number of the children are from the area and are victims of that scourge. The 'Education Campaign' enlightens them regarding the value of education.

Eventually, when the boys declare never to let another child languish in bondedness, to stop and eliminate child labor, it is not mere mouthing or just a feeling of the ignominy of being an ex-child laborer, but a deep-seated understanding of the matter, which drives them to act and do the things that we see Ajay Kumar from Bihar doing. Ajay Kumar may seem to be an exception. Perhaps he is – more dynamic than a lot of others, with strong leadership traits. But it must be remembered that a tiny goatherd in a strongly caste-ridden Bihar village could never have had the courage to stand up to anybody, let alone the *sarpanch* of the place. And it was at the Ashram that Ajay's potentials were developed.

Then there is Kalu Kumar (see Box 4). And it is not these isolated cases alone. It has been seen that each and every boy becomes sufficiently empowered to effect some change or the other, in their families, their village or in the community. This has societal repercussions. Along with the activists of the BMGs, through these empowered boys, their parents, kin and villagers too become empowered. They are progressively made aware of various issues; the connections are made and they gradually learn of their rights.

Box 4: Kalu Kumar

Kalu (14), a former goatherd from Bihar, was abducted and bonded into the carpet industry. Kalu has the distinction of being invited by the then President of the United States, Bill Clinton, to launch a book on child labor. Kalu also has it to his credit that he told Clinton, "I have been freed from bondage, but several of my brothers and sisters are still languishing in it." And had then asked him: "There are 250 million child laborers in the world, what are you doing about them?"

Kalu has been at the Ashram since 1998, admitted to the formal school in Sauthana. He gets good grades and enjoys every minute of his life in school and at the Ashram. His exposures abroad have instilled an abundance of confidence in him. He wants to be a social worker when he grows up, working for the uplifting of the rural poor – exactly how and in what form, he is not too sure at the moment.

Witty Kalu; an incredible actor, Kalu; a fast and intelligent learner – Kalu. Would his potentials be realised, had he still been a goatherd, an agricultural laborer in his village or a morally devastated carpet weaver in a far-flung place? Would he have had the courage to look an urban stranger in the eye and give humorous ripostes to all the questions? Laughing away past humiliations and looking forward to a glorious future...

Empowerment of the family and society

After all this rigour, no wonder then, that when the boys go back home, villagers, parents and their kin are awestruck. They are astounded by the transformation that they perceive in the boys. Their boys have changed in every single respect, from their appearance to their mannerisms. All the boys effect some change or the other in their households and in their villages: the importance of education, the abuse of alcohol, the respect of women and of all humankind, and above all, the recognition that all human beings are equal.

Results show how, even in Bihar, from where most of the child laborers come; where migration, oppression and poverty are rampant; the boys, with the activists of the BMG, achieve major upheavals in their villages. The example of Ajay Kumar is a case in point. And it is not Ajay Kumar and his village, Ramchandrapur, alone. It is happening at various levels all over the place, wherever the BMGs are. The children's parents are in direct contact with the Ashram personnel, initially when the boys are admitted, and when they go back home; and throughout their stay, indirectly,

through the BMG/BBA activists of the area. As an end result, it is seen that in a number of BMG villages, the empowered children -- who in turn empower their peers; and together with the BMG activists empower their parents and the villagers, in some way or the other -- are responsible for a movement that is in its nascent stage at the moment but is progressively gaining momentum.

Transition from service delivery mode to the rights mode

An important lesson that can be derived from the experiment is how to use service delivery to attain a rights approach.

Poverty-stricken bonded children, at the crucial moment they are freed, need relief. Service delivery is the only way to resuscitate them. But the social sustainability of the intervention can be jeopardised in the long run if a transition is not made. And in the context of scarce resources, that would not be optimising what is available, leading to lowering of the cost effectiveness.

Most mid-way homes, including state run ones, have an approach of service delivery. The point of departure of the Bal Ashram is that, although their approach is that of service delivery at the beginning of a boy's stay at the Ashram, this is steadily graduated to a rights approach.

In the end, it becomes imperative that unless a process has all the factors such as contextualisation, embeddedness and inclusion of society, and is carried out not in the service delivery but in the rights approach, no concrete results can be achieved.

7. Conclusion:

The Up-sarpanch (Vice Chairman) of the Sauthana panchayat as well as other political bigwigs of the area who regularly come to the Ashram to inaugurate and preside over functions, when asked for their opinions on the venture, gave amazing replies akin to, "All these orphaned kids... you are feeding them, clothing them, teaching them to read and write."

Yet, maybe this is not such an amazing comment. It is rather like the ostrich burying its face in the sand so as not to see. Like most others, these people do not know of the venture. They do not know, because they do not want to know. Knowing would raise a number of uncomfortable questions, which they would be loath to answer. It is much safer to treat the child laborers as poor little orphaned kids – a totally apolitical matter.

Indeed, child labor is an intensely political issue. It is political on two counts:

The first aspect is the politics between the adults and the adults. Here, one group, of higher caste, rich landholders and moneylenders, perpetuate various kinds of atrocities on the second group, the lower caste, poor, landless peasants, trapping them into a situation where the latter are deprived of adequate livelihood opportunities.

The second aspect is the politics between the adults and the children: that the parents of the child laborers send their children out to work, put them into bondedness. This particular discourse is, of course, set up by the 'higher ups' to hide the incessant marginalisation of the 'lower downs' and subsequently exploit their children.

Additionally, the state evades its responsibilities by failing to set up a good educational system and no proper nutritional amenities for the children of the 'lower downs', so that they can perform well in school. It can be said that the state is partisan in many ways and perpetuates child labor as well as the disempowerment and marginalisation of the communities the children belong to. Consequently, the children are deprived of all rights and, subsequently, it is the parents who are blamed.

The Bal Ashram initiative challenges these equations using a multiple set of strategies (see Box 5) and in the process effectively politicises the children to take up cudgels on behalf of other children who are similarly deprived due to national, regional and global forces that perpetuate socio-economic and ecological injustices.

Naturally, it would be most convenient to classify these children as destitutes and orphans and not address the socio-political and economic challenges that they pose.

One of the challenges pertains to the question of how to view 'child labor'.

Who are these child laborers? Are they just hapless, passive victims of circumstance, cast into their present situations because of the ignorance of their parents? Or are they able to think and act on their own once they get the initial boost? Contemporary discourses tend to concentrate mostly on the former perception. It is true that the children are victims but, at the same time, they are able to think and act on their own too. Refusal to accept this is a part of the politics of subjugation and the denial of agency and voice to the children.

Box 5: Combating child labor: strategies for success

To effectively rehabilitate and combat child labor from its very roots, a combination of strategies is used by the Ashram, including:

1. The children are made a part of the decision-making process right from the point of initiation. The essence of self-actualisation and responsibility starts here.
2. Adequate measures are taken to ensure that the traumatised and psychologically shattered bonded and child laborers enjoy their childhood and their stay at the Ashram by bestowing ample love, understanding and food security on the children.
3. All the children of the Ashram are part of the Bal Panchayat, where their lessons in governance start. In their later lives, along with the BMG activists, these children become a part of the Bal Panchayat in their villages and take up cudgels on various issues, including the total elimination of child labor in and around their villages.
4. Various sorts of education packages depending on the skills, aptitudes and choices of the individual child are imparted to build up economic security, thus preventing a reversion to child servitude.
5. Apart from education, the children of the Ashram are encouraged to participate in demonstrations, rallies and marches highlighting social problems prevailing in their local areas. The children are provided with adequate information and support to design campaigns. This enables them to grasp the issues, internalise them and give vent to their creativity.
6. Counselling and motivation of parents are undertaken regularly to ensure their participation in the campaigns regarding child servitude.

The most important lesson that is learnt from this exercise is that one cannot address issues related to child labor isolated from the socio-political and ecological context, which at present takes the form of the state perpetuating discriminatory practices against the children. A process that begins by denying access to quality

education, to millions of poor children across the country, continues in the failure to ensure even minimum wages to an adult.

The Bal Ashram children have shown that a little bit of support, along with the respect and dignity they are shown as human beings, can go a long way to ameliorate the situation.

In short, the Bal Ashram initiative has dared to challenge the bastions of power.

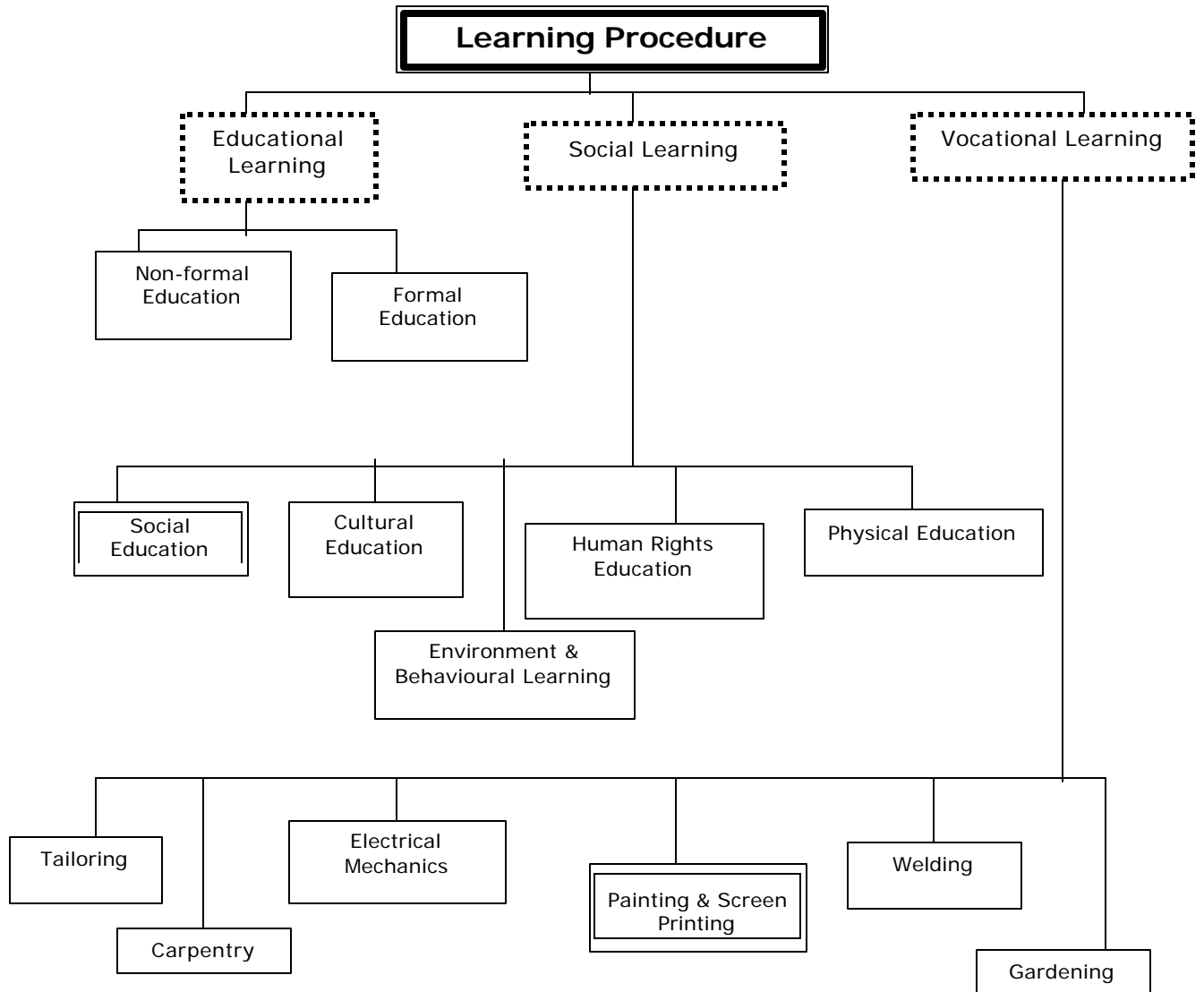
The general impression amongst the elite is that child laborers are dull, diffident, indolent and lethargic, distrusting and untrustworthy. The favourite argument is that they come from a background that is alike and nothing can change their attitude. It is true that most children, as well as their parents or kin, are diffident and distrusting. But then, how could people be otherwise under similar inhuman circumstances, when individuals have to bond themselves and their children for a few thousand rupees? How could children behave otherwise, when they have no childhood, no hope, and no future? When working for others, very little food, abuses and thrashings are the order of the day? When it has been ingrained into them over the generations that they are the scum of the society.

However, what a difference it makes to these dull, diffident and lethargic children when they are told that they too are human; as children, they too have similar rights to those that the pretty, laughing children of the rich enjoy; they too have a future. If they are not doing anything morally wrong, they have nothing to be afraid of. Furthermore, they are free citizens of a free country. No laws of the land can tie them or anybody down to bondedness.

A good practice is seen as a bad practice from the point of view of vested interests, committed to the condescending and sneering attitude that child laborers are dull, diffident, indolent and the rest. *By proving otherwise, the Bal Ashram initiative has given the children voice and agency.* The venture in its totality, and not just individual aspects of it, can be termed as a good practice, from the children's point of view. This is because all the individual aspects are integrated into a comprehensive strategy that not only provides an answer to the question of how to deal with the 'here and now' issues related to rehabilitating freed bonded child labor but also how to arm these very children to fight for the elimination of child servitude.

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Appendix 1: The Learning Procedure



Appendix 2: The Birthday Celebrations

Come Sunday, the boys are agog with excitement. It's a holiday. They'll be allowed to watch TV. No school. It's all there, but what the inmates of the Ashram look forward to most is celebrating their birthdays.

So, on Sundays, four or five boys 'celebrate their birthdays'. It's an elaborate affair, held in the community hall. The birthday boys come freshly bathed and decked in their Sunday best. There's a fire lit in the center, for the *yagna* (a sacrificial rite involving burning of specific offerings). The birthday boys sit surrounding it and the whole Ashram – including visitors and guests – congregates around them. The boys, along with the others, start chanting a *mantra*.

To the watcher, what might seem an essentially Vedic ritual with Sanskrit hymns presently turns out to be an eye-opener, when the person conducting the ceremony starts elucidating the meaning of the hymn. It starts with an evocation of the Almighty that says "...not just to me, but to all those around me, grant the boon of wisdom and good judgement.... ...we do not want wealth..."

Along with the chant comes the clarification of the *yagna* and its implements.

When people come together, sit together (for the *yagna*), they are, in essence, forming a unified group, an organization.

The significance of the water, firewood, fire and the *ghee* (clarified butter) that is poured into it are all intertwined, basically meant for the motivation of the assembly. Each piece of the firewood is each one of us that comes together to help the fire (the movement) burn. Each spoonful of the *ghee* is the impetus from the people that helps the fire flare up and spread – and the movement spreads far and wide. Yet there is the water that is sprinkled around the base of the fire, containing it, essentially to remind us all of our responsibilities while fighting for our rights, and warning us against becoming too overbearing in our demeanour.

And so the rendering goes on. There is yet another *shloka*, which says, 'I give back to nature what I take from it' and the boys are made to understand that, 'we give back to society, what we take from it...'

There is much more. The portrayal of each couplet is replete with poignant connotations that have a direct relevance to the boys' lives and their future.

The rituals end with lumps of freshly made sweetmeats being served – to the birthday boys first and then to the rest of the people. And then it's a free for all. The Ashram boys don their dancing gear and flail arms and legs, gyrate – in the name of a dance – and scream their heads off, singing. The personnel of the Ashram join them in the revelry till lunchtime.