



On the Record: Global Movement for Children

Issue 11: When Children Take Control

From the AP Editorial Desk

The Bal Manch parliaments offer children a chance to participate in running their communities

"Child marriage is a real problem in our village," 12-year-old Chand tells a UNICEF officer at a Bal Manch (children's forum) meeting in the Thar desert. "Over 50 girls are already married and more will be. I saw a seven-day-old girl married in her mother's arms. How can she be a wife when she does not even know she is getting married?"



Chand's concern is recorded by the group and put on the agenda of issues to be addressed within a month's time. Here, in the northern desert state of Rajasthan, the "Say Yes" directive to "listen to children" is being taken very seriously. And this is not the only place in India where children are speaking out. Children's parliaments are catching on throughout the entire country.

The Young Politician: 12 year old Chand speaks out against child marriage.

In 1997, UNICEF launched the Bal Manch initiative with the help of the government of Rajasthan. These children's forums were conceived as a complement to their adult versions known in India as panchayats (village councils). Panchayats were established in 1992 through a constitutional amendment that sought to decentralize political power. One-third of panchayat seats are set aside for women and quotas are established for so-called "backward castes."

There is also a one-third gender quota in the children's version, along with special quotas for low-caste children, child laborers or those too poor to afford the uniform and books required to attend public school. (Sixty-four percent of the children in India who are in school complete only five years of schooling. Of these, only one-third pass minimum achievement tests.)

In Rajasthan alone, there are more than 200 bal panchayats. Their impact on the community level has been impressive. In Pacchad Village in the state's Baran district, girl "parliamentarians" tried to prevent the child marriage of their playmate. Though they did not succeed, they did encourage

some highly critical analysis of a so-called "traditional" practice that is widespread in conservative states such as Rajasthan.

The first step in developing a Bal Manch is for a local NGO to establish a relationship with a village. Initially, villages were chosen where Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), the principal NGO involved, had already worked.

Once a relationship is established with a community, public awareness campaigns promoting child rights are launched and even introduced in adult panchayat meetings. A festive children's carnival is then staged to help pique interest in children's rights and bring out young people in the community.

These youth are in turn mobilized by NGO workers to establish their own bal panchayats by electing eleven to sixteen members who, in turn, elect their own officers. If only boys are elected, the position of vice-chairperson is immediately set aside for a girl. Similarly, if other categories of young people are not represented through elections, they are appointed. Bal Manch conventions are held every year to coordinate the movement, and help raise awareness about children's rights.



Why all the rules? To ensure that children learn democracy and tolerance as one of their core values.

Organizers in Rajasthan say that the key to the success of the children's parliaments is to avoid manipulating the young delegates, or treating them as tokens. Instead, the now growing Bal Manch system is operating on the philosophy set out by Roger Hart of the UNICEF Innocenti Center in Italy: that the ultimate aim of child participation must be to support child-initiated projects, and to ensure that children and adults jointly take the decisions which affect young people in their community.



Laying it Out: Democracy for children is catching on in India.

The reaction from adults to all this young activism has been varied. Governmental bodies and school officials have been some of the most resistant. But pressure has been sustained through children's grassroots initiatives and also through a monthly newsletter called "UDAAN" (flight). Udaan is put together entirely by children, though an adult does help with production.

The other big problem is that the outside communities, the impact of the Bal Manch movement on national, regional and even local policy has been minimal. And this, say activists young and

old, is where the real changes must occur if children are to really participate in building their own future.

The Power of Example

Childrens' parliaments are galvanizing communities in the state of Rajasthan

After the children of Paccad village, in the state of Rajasthan, planted trees to stop deforestation, village elders were inspired to dig a much-needed tube-well for drinking water.

In neighboring Bansthuni village, girl Bal Manch members grew so tired of passing an ever-rising heap of garbage and cow dung on a disputed plot of land on their way to school, that they began cleaning up the mess themselves. The adults disputing the land became so humbled by the girls' initiative that they hired tractors to remove the mess within minutes.

In Kadyavan Village of Baran district, Bal Manch members obtained the keys to their school so that they could make sure it opened more regularly than before. In Kelwara village, Bal Manch members raised funds for a pulse polio booth that was easily accessible to those most at risk. In Deori village, Bal Manch members collected 1200 rupees (approximately U.S. \$25) for a library. In Pratapnager, Dholpur District, Bal Manch members raised funds for victims of the Kargil War with Pakistan. They also organized a quiz competition in which 600 children participated.

Taking their cue: Adults are increasingly following the lead of young village parliamentarians.

In Devoli Kala Village of Pali District, children parliamentarians collected money for victims of a cyclone in eastern Orissa. They also tested 350 samples of salt. In Khairwad village, Kota District, girl Bal Manch members blocked a road because a hand pump had been out of water for more than a week. Three hours later, the road pump was repaired.



In neighboring Lisria Village, Bal Manch members intervened when a girl in their village was pulled out of school and made to study only religious texts. Bal Manch activists put continuous pressure on the girl's parents and school, and she was eventually re-enrolled.

In www.ofweddingdresses.com and Dhaki villages of Alwar District, Bal Manch members surveyed children in their community and presented the results along with an action plan for change to each village's respective panchayat board.

One member of Parliament from Rajasthan has been so impressed with the power of the children's parliaments, that he reserved five percent of the development budget for proposals from Bal Manchs.