

Mewat Shiksha Panchayat

It Takes
a Village to
Educate a Child

GOOD PRACTICES
DOCUMENTATION



Alwar Mewat
Institute of Education
and Development



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Ananthapriya Subramanian

Series Editor: Alex George



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Foreword



ActionAid's struggle to end poverty by taking sides with the poor has been ongoing for many decades and this has resulted in some significant changes in the lives of the marginalized in some areas. Poverty entails lack of empowerment, and lack of opportunity, knowledge and education. The Mewat region in Alwar district of Rajasthan is an area where children have been deprived of education due to many reasons. ActionAid has been actively pursuing the agenda of educational rights in many ways and has adopted various approaches and strategies while engaging on this issue. There have been many changes, some of which, especially at the community level, have gone unnoticed. At the same time, there have been significantly successful models of work around education and child rights. The present publication is one in a series of Good Practices documentation that Child Rights Focus, ActionAid will be bring out.

In this context, Child Right Focus, ActionAid has tried to document one such successful strategy by the ActionAid Rajasthan Regional Office and that of Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED), the partner organization involved in this collaborative work. This story is about 'Shiksha Panchayat', a community-based platform constituting the coming together of various village-level stakeholders of education. This is a community forum of many stakeholders who are interested to bring change in the lives of children, especially that of girls, through education. Siksha Panchayat is a diverse group of the marginalized, which has been successful in addressing the issue of lack of education or poorer access and quality of education by pursuing multiple strategies. More details on the initiation and functioning of this model are available in this documentation.

This Good Practices Documentation would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of various people.

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Last but not the least we express our thanks to 'Books for Change' for editing, designing and printing the study report.

Alex George

Series Editor, Child Rights Good Practices Documentation

Head, Child Rights Focus, ActionAid Association

Executive Summary



The Meos or Mewatis are one of the well-known communities of the Mewat region. Mewat is the geographical name given to a region that covers parts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.¹

The Muslims of Mewat are called Meos and the Hindus are called Minas. The community speaks Mewati, which is a Rajasthani dialect influenced by Brij Bhasha.²

Once a warrior tribe, the Meos are now marginal farmers with nominal landholdings, cultivating onions, wheat and mustard. Poverty is endemic in the Mewat region, which has visibly poor infrastructure and social sector services, with non-existent roads, lack of even primary healthcare facilities and, where present, schools that are run-down. Years of social alienation and economic deprivation have had a negative impact on education, in particular an abysmally low literacy rate among Meo Muslims, less than 10 per cent of whom can barely read and write.³

A mismatch between traditional cultural and religious beliefs and the 'modern' formal school education system has driven up the non-enrolment rate, especially of girls, among Meo Muslims. According to official estimates, the proportion of Meo Muslim girls in school is less than 1 per cent in the Mewat region.

The influential local clergy or *maulanas* advocated *din-e-taleem*, the study of religion, as the only form of education that was permissible for girls. *Duniya-ki-taleem* (modern education) was considered antithetical to Islam. The educational character of formal schools—especially the use of Hindi as the medium of learning, singing and dancing, and the pictorial representation of characters and

1. The Mewatis live mostly in Faridabad, Gurgaon, Mahendergarh and Ambala districts of Haryana; Mathura, Bulandshahr, Aligarh and Saharanpur districts of Uttar Pradesh; and Alwar and Bharatpur districts of Rajasthan.

2. Brij Bhasha is a western Indian Hindi language closely related to Hindustani.

3. Mitchell, Richard C. and Moore, Shannon A. (eds), *Politics, Participation and Power Relations: Transdisciplinary Approaches to Critical Citizenship in the Classroom and Community*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012.

events—was perceived as un-Islamic or even anti-Islamic. Parents complied with the clergy's *diktat*. The non-availability or poor availability of schools and teachers, leave alone all-girls schools and female teachers, further exacerbated the state of educational deprivation among the Meo Muslims.

It was in this context that ActionAid decided to work on the issue of education in the Mewat region in the districts of Alwar and Bharatpur in Rajasthan. The Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED) was chosen as the implementing partner as this grassroots organization was already working on the issue in Mewat.

Both ActionAid and AMIED believed that NGOs could only act as catalysts and any desire for change had to come from the community itself. Guided by this belief, together they worked with the marginalized communities in Mewat who themselves wanted a forum to pursue and tackle the issues related to lack of educational facilities in the region. The Mewat Shiksha Panchayat (Education Forum) was thus born.

The project is part of ActionAid's Khiltee Kaliyaan initiative, which is aimed at securing the rights of marginalized and vulnerable children in Rajasthan. At the state level, Khiltee Kaliyaan is a network working on children's rights. In the Mewat region, the Khiltee Kaliyaan project aims to generate awareness within the Mewat community on the issues of education, the rights of children, and the schemes and policies available for them. The strategy was to use the platform of the Shiksha Panchayat to mobilize the Mewat community in the project area to demand educational facilities as a right, especially for girl children. The project is being implemented since 2008 in Alwar and Bharatpur districts.

This report aims to understand the processes involved in the formation and functioning of the Mewat Shiksha Panchayat, a vibrant community forum that has been able to successfully bring about changes, and to document the impact of the panchayat on education, especially in the lives of Meo Muslim girls (highlighted through case stories).

Headline Findings

1. Years of neglect by policy makers and implementers are visible everywhere in the Mewat area of Alwar district. Muddy stretches passing off as roads remain the only access to villages. Schools are in a dilapidated state and have few classrooms. Teachers are either too few in number or not trained to teach beyond primary school.
2. With the coming together of various stakeholders at the community level to form the Shiksha Panchayat, the Meo Muslim community has made the transition from considering education as unnecessary and irrelevant to demanding education for their children as a fundamental right. 'Our belief was that Hindi is only for Hindus, education is not for Muslims. Now we know better. Education is our right, we have to demand it,' says a Shiksha Panchayat member.
3. The biggest strength of the Shiksha Panchayat—at the village, cluster and block levels —is that it has members drawn from different castes and religions who are united by one cause: education.

'Our problems are the same; the solution is for all of us. If one benefits, all of us benefit,' a Shiksha Panchayat member points out.
4. As a forum the Shiksha Panchayat is empowered to seek changes benefiting the village community. Where earlier members would have been afraid to voice their opinion, now they have no hesitation in confronting officials to demand their rights. 'Earlier, we did not know the meaning of *loktantra* or that officers work for us. We are not seeking alms, we are demanding our rights,' asserts Jasmal, a rights-conscious Shiksha Panchayat member.
5. The change in the community's attitude towards education, especially for girls, is reflected in the increase in the number of girls now going to school beyond Class V. The fact that the girls finishing Class X are first-generation learners is yet another positive aspect.
6. Women are not part of the main Shiksha Panchayat. They sit in a separate forum, the Mahila Shiksha Panchayat, to talk about issues pertaining to education. They are yet to be recognized as critical stakeholders, especially in enabling girls' education.

Abbreviations & Glossary



AMIED	:	Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development
BEO	:	Block Education Officer
<i>Bigha</i>	:	A measure of land area that varies greatly from state to state and district to district. Usually less than an acre, it can also be upwards of 3 acres.
DEO	:	District Education Officer
<i>Dharna</i>	:	A sit-in conducted at the door of a government office as a means of obtaining compliance with a demand for justice
FGD	:	Focus Group Discussion
<i>Gherao</i>	:	A protest in which a group of people surround politicians or a government building until their demands are met
<i>Maulana</i>	:	Muslim religious cleric
<i>Patta</i>	:	A legal document in India certifying ownership to a specific piece of land
RTE	:	Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009
SDM	:	Sub-Divisional Magistrate
SMC	:	School Management Committee
SSA	:	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All)
TLM	:	Teaching Learning Methods

1. Introduction



School Management Committees (SMCs) have been provisioned under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, also known as the Right to Education (RTE) Act. Prior to the introduction of this act there were Village Education Committees (VECs), which were expected to perform a similar but lesser role and without the statutory powers of SMCs. The VECs and their new version under the RTE Act, the SMCs, are expected to fulfil the responsibilities of community participation, community management and the monitoring of the functioning of schools. However, barring some exceptions, these bodies have not been able to adequately discharge these responsibilities.

There are various reasons for this failure. A close look reveals the lacunae in the constitution and functioning of SMCs. For example, many SMCs are not democratically elected as is stipulated in the RTE Act. A national study of 2,191 schools in 17 states in India, conducted by ActionAid as part of the Right to Education Forum in 2013, has pointed out that SMCs were constituted through elections in only 49 per cent of schools. Many SMC members did not know that they were, in fact, its members as they were nominated by the school authorities without their knowledge or consent. SMCs were also not constituted as per the prescribed norms for gender and social group representation as mentioned in the act, thus affecting the democratic representation of women, and disadvantaged sections such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The RTE Act 2009 in section 21 (1) prescribes that 50 per cent of the members of SMCs have to be women and that representation has to be given to disadvantaged and weaker sections. Only 54 per cent of the SMCs were constituted as per the prescribed norms of representation.¹ SMC members were also not made aware as to what their rights were, with the result that they simply endorsed the decisions of school authorities in managing the school and were not able to perform a monitoring role.

1. Right to Education Forum, *Status of Implementation of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009: Year Three (2012–2013)*, New Delhi: Right to Education Forum, 2013.

It is in the context of the failure of the SMCs and the erstwhile VECs to adequately perform their stated role that the idea of Shiksha Panchayat as a village-level platform to ensure the functioning of the school gathers significance. The panchayat activates the SMC itself through the involvement of the larger community in education. The Shiksha Panchayat has emerged from the people themselves and includes various stakeholders of education from the village, such as the sarpanch and members of the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), as well as representatives of religious and caste communities of the village, making it a representative body with popular acceptance as opposed to SMCs and VECs. SMCs and VECs, though legal bodies, did not derive their acceptance from the community as they were not the result of a community process of people coming together in the cause of education.

It is in order to highlight the need for such wider social formations to activate the education system that Child Rights Focus considered it necessary to document the Shiksha Panchayat model in detail and prepare this report.

This report has been undertaken with the following objectives:

1. to understand the concept of Shiksha Panchayat and the processes involved in its formation and functioning;
2. to understand the impact of the Shiksha Panchayat on the community, office bearers and other stakeholders;
3. to understand its impact on education, especially of Meo Muslim girls;
4. to document the key lessons and challenges;
5. to capture the good practices of the Shiksha Panchayat model; and
6. to review the sustainability of the model.

Process of Documentation

For the purpose of the report, nine villages in Kishangarh block of Alwar district were chosen for the field visits: Mirzapur, Maida Bas, Bidarka, Baghoda, Jeelota, Musa Khera, Chor Basai, Khanpur and Ismailpur. Interviews were conducted with teachers from government schools and residential schools, AMIED staff, ActionAid staff, religious leaders, parents, girl students and district officials. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) formed the basis of interactions with the Shiksha Panchayat members and SMC members. One FGD was conducted with the Mahila Shiksha Panchayat members. Direct observation was a key element in all of the interactions and visits to schools and villages. Throughout, several rounds of discussions were held based on desk reviews and field visits by AMIED and ActionAid. Feedback was also taken based on findings.

Three government schools —in the villages of Baghoda, Musa Khera and Maida Bas—were visited for interviews with teachers and headmasters. One discussion was held with the girl students of the Kasturba Gandhi residential school in Kishangarh Bas.

2. Mewat and the Shiksha Panchayat: A Background Note



According to some accounts the word *Mewati* means a resident of the Mewat land,¹ while others argue that the name has been derived from the Sanskrit word *mina-vati* (abounding in fish).²

The Meo Muslims, who are believed to be a branch of the Mina community,³ are an ethnically unique tribal community in Rajasthan originally practising both Hindu and Islamic customs, traditions and beliefs.

The conversion to Islam is believed to have started in the fourteenth century during the reign of Ferozeshah Tughlaq,⁴ though during the reign of Aurangazeb the Meos voluntarily accepted Islam because it was in their political interest to do so.⁵ The community, however, retained its distinctive Hindu heritage and lineage for a long time. In addition to the reading of the Koran, the reading of the Hindu epics Mahabharata and Ramayana was equally, or even more, popular. Hindu shrines far outnumbered mosques in Mewat.⁶ The Meos followed traditional Hindu customs with regard to marriage and kinship. Even today, Meo women do not observe the purdah. After 1947, though, a strong move towards Islamization began in Mewat. A religious revival movement, Tablighi Jamaat (Group of Preachers), was initiated in Mewat in 1926 by the Islamic scholar Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, which became popular. Under its influence, many of the Hindu rituals, ceremonies and festivals were abandoned by

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1. Crooke, W., *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western India*, Calcutta: Government Printing Press, 1896.
 2. Singh, N.K. and Mishra, A.P., *Global Encyclopaedic Ethnography of Indian Muslims*, Vol. 2, Global Vision Publishing House, 2008.
 3. Russell, R.V. and Hiralal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, London: Macmillan and Company, 1916.
 4. *Rajasthan District Gazetteers*, Bharatpur, 1971.
 5. Singh and Mishra, *Global Encyclopaedic Ethnography of Indian Muslims*.
 6. Singh, N.K. and Khan, A.M. (eds), *Encyclopaedia of the World Muslims: Tribes, Castes and Communities*, Vol. 1, Global Vision Publishing House, 2001.

Muslims, and substitutes from the Islamic tradition were adopted in their place as part of a religious revival.⁷

There were several reasons for the Islamic revival in Mewat but the communal politics of the 1930s and 1940s, and the Partition itself are believed to have been major contributing factors.⁸ Partition produced an identity crisis among the Meos and the feeling in the community that its very existence was threatened. Over the years, the Meos became socially alienated from the mainstream society that was itself marked by distinct caste, religious and ethnic fault lines.

In addition, the Meo community has been unable to shrug off its label of a 'criminal tribe'. Under the British, the Meos were included under the provisions of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. The act, renewed and amended repeatedly, remained in effect till 1949, when it was repealed. Under its draconian provisions, a carefully selected list of ethnic and social communities of India—many that had defended the nationalist cause in 1857—were defined as 'habitually criminal' and 'addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences', and they were stripped of a range of civil liberties.⁹

Education Not a Priority

Early marriage is fairly common in the region with girls being married off as early as 15 or 16 years. Despite growing awareness that their children must not follow in their footsteps and should have a different future that involves going to school, a number of parents in this community feel that 'Education is fine but girls must get married early.'¹⁰

7. <<http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-tablighi-jamaat/>>, accessed on 29 August 2014.

8. <http://www.manushi-india.org/pdfs_issues/PDF%20files%20103/2.%20Meos%20of%20Mewat.pdf>, accessed on 29 August 2014.

9. <http://indpaedia.com/ind/index.php/Meo_%28community_from_Mewat%29>, accessed on 29 August 2014.

10. Emerged from interviews with mothers in Maida Bas and Bidarka.

A number of children, especially girls, drop out after primary school mainly because they do not really learn anything much at school, and parents do not see the relevance of education. In a number of villages in the region, there are no elementary schools after Class V, let alone secondary schools. Besides, the existing schools have poor infrastructure and the student–teacher ratio is skewed, being much higher than the mandated 30:1.¹¹ The quality of teaching in government schools remains a matter of concern, with the majority of government teachers having little or no training. As a result, the quality of learning in such schools leaves a lot to be desired.

The Khiltee Kaliyaan Initiative

It was in this context that ActionAid decided to work on the issue of education in the Mewat region in the districts of Alwar and Bharatpur in Rajasthan, with its project partner AMIED. Though the focus of the project titled Khiltee Kaliyaan was education of Meo Muslim children, a conscious decision was taken at the outset that the project would work with all communities in Mewat as they had suffered generations of neglect and discrimination at the hands of policy makers and implementers. Guided by the belief that NGOs could only act as catalysts and that change had to come from the community itself, ActionAid and AMIED together worked with the marginalized communities in Mewat who themselves desired a forum to tackle the issues related to lack of educational facilities in the region. The Mewat Shiksha Panchayat was thus born in 2008.

Khiltee Kaliyaan had the following key objectives:

1. to generate awareness within Mewati society on the issues of education and rights of children, and the schemes and policies available;

11. As per the Right to Education Act, 2009, the pupil–teacher ratio should be 30:1 for lower primary schools (Classes I–V) and 35:1 for upper primary schools (Classes VI–VIII).

2. to mobilize Mewati society in the project area to form the Shiksha Panchayat as a community-based platform to understand the challenges in education and demand educational facilities for their children as a right;
3. to work with all key stakeholders who were critical to the process of community engagement with the Shiksha Panchayat; and
4. to emphasize on the education of girls, especially beyond primary school.

Project geography

The project is spread over two districts of Alwar and Bharatpur. In total, ActionAid and AMIED are working in 50 villages of Kishangarh block in Alwar district and 20 villages of Nagar block in Bharatpur district.

The Shiksha Panchayat Concept

The Shiksha Panchayat is a platform created by the Mewat rural community to raise issues of education in the region. Evidence shows that poor, marginalized communities such as the people of Mewat region lack the institutions needed for economic and social development. Dominance by an elite group or oligarchy ensures that educational opportunities are not given to the marginalized, the fear being that with education people would be more likely to demand political power, thus undermining the dominance of the elite. The persistence of overwhelming illiteracy in the Mewat region, coupled with age-old stereotypes about the criminality of Meo Muslims, has served to keep them from taking advantage of the economic and social opportunities, which could otherwise have facilitated their making informed choices in the political processes also.

AMIED and ActionAid presented data to the Mewati community highlighting the state of educational facilities in the Mewat area. The

key issues regarding schools that were discussed were:

1. lack of teachers in the primary schools in the area;
2. lack of secondary or higher secondary schools;
3. lack of trained teachers in the few existing upper primary schools;
and
4. poor school infrastructure, including lack of toilets.

Once they realized that formal school-based education was not at odds with religious education and, in fact, that education was necessary for their community to take advantage of social opportunities, the members of the community decided that they needed to mobilize themselves to form a pressure group to address the issues of discrimination that prevented their children from accessing education.

Thus the idea to form a community platform—the Shiksha Panchayat—was born with support from AMIED and ActionAid. The rationale behind the forum was that all the members were stakeholders who were interested in seeing the desired changes in their communities vis-à-vis education. The forum consisted of members of different communities or *mohallas*, castes and religion. The idea behind this diverse grouping was simple: United we stand, divided we fall. By having this wide-ranging representation, the Shiksha Panchayat was clear that the focus was to address the lack of education opportunities for *all* of Mewat's children. So Dalits, Sikhs, Meo Muslims, Baniyas, Scheduled Castes, etc.—all became members of the Shiksha Panchayat.

The Shiksha Panchayat also has as its members the sarpanch, PRI members, farmers and daily wage workers, which again ensures representation of diverse voices from different economic

backgrounds and status. Progressive-minded religious leaders were taken on board to ensure a wider ownership of the process.

The Shiksha Panchayat has three to four tiers. The first tier is at the village level, which forms the base. For this tier, the community has chosen 20–25 people as members. The selection is done through a democratic process, ensuring that all castes and religions are represented. The next tier is at the cluster level where two to three members from each village are represented. So, in the case of Kishangarh Bas there are 50 villages with six clusters, each having eight to ten villages. At the next level, 10 members are selected from each cluster to form the block-level Shiksha Panchayat federation. The district-level Mewat Shiksha Panchayat has 45 members adequately represented by all the tiers.

At each tier, the Shiksha Panchayat organizes regular meetings to discuss issues related to education and develop strategies to try and resolve problems. The village-level panchayat meets monthly while the cluster group meets once in two months. If an issue does not get resolved by the village-level panchayat, the matter is raised at the next level and so on. A nominal registration fee of Rs 11 is collected from all the Shiksha Panchayat members who are also issued identity cards.

The Mewat Shiksha Panchayat aims to:

1. create a conducive environment for quality education for all children, but in particular girls, in the Mewat region;
2. lobby for the constitutionally guaranteed right to education through available democratic forms, including *dharnas*;
3. ensure effective implementation of government policies and programmes on education;

4. ensure community ownership of government schools, anganwadis and health centres that would see their effective functioning; and
5. engage with the local administration to ensure effective functioning of schools.



3. Community Voices, Struggles and Successes



‘Earlier, our children were roaming like cows. We did not know our rights. Now, we can stand in front of the collector and demand our rights,’ declares a PRI member.

Mirzapur is a village in Kishangarh Bas block of Alwar district. The village, with 250 families, is predominantly Meo Muslim. The community has been neglected for decades. In 2005, the only primary school in the village was in a run-down state. Parents did not send their girls to the school, and the boys who did go were not learning anything. There were also massive irregularities in the mid-day meal programme being run in the school.

Shabbudin, an ex-sarpanch of the village, says, ‘The school was in a pathetic state. The previous sarpanch used to misappropriate the money allocated for the mid-day meal scheme. He would take it from the teacher. There were less than 20 children at school but the accounts showed that the mid-day meal was being provided for 200 children!’

The Meo Muslim community had little interest in the affairs of the school. They focused their energies on agriculture, and education had little relevance for them. On their part, political leaders and officials also paid little attention to their problems. The lawmakers highlighted the stereotype of criminality, not the problems of the Mewat region. ‘It was easier to dub Meos as criminals and only interested in having *madrasas*,’ Noor Mohammed, director of AMIED, recalls. ‘It was a struggle initially. The community was convinced we had come to “spoil” their children. They asked us “Why do we need education? We are Muslims, we don’t need education.”’

Some key processes that the Mewat Shiksha Panchayat has followed are as under:

1. engaging in sustained dialogue with the community;

Proud Father

The community was overwhelmingly illiterate but the people could see the difference in their girls. A father bought a *salwar suit* for his daughter and, wanting to impress her, told her it cost him Rs 250. The girl, however, could read the price tag and told him: ‘Why are you lying father? This cost Rs125.’ Instead of getting offended, the father was proud that his daughter could read!

2. respecting cultural and religious sensitivities;
3. involving diverse stakeholders such as *maulanas*, teachers, women, SMC members, sarpanches, PRI members;
4. making the Shiksha Panchayat inclusive, with representation from different castes and religions; and
5. enabling the community to take ownership.

Initially, with some money from the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan,¹ AMIED started a bridge course in 2005–06 for the girls in the community. The girls did not at that time go to school; however some boys did attend school. AMIED and ActionAid persuaded parents to send their girls to the bridge course.

According to Noor Mohammed,

The community members would watch every step we took with suspicion but tolerated our presence. After a few months, however, they saw that the girls were, in fact, learning. Not only that, they could also see that the boys at school were not learning. Seeing the difference, they started to ask questions. ‘Why are our boys not able to read and write?’ They asked us to teach the boys too. The teachers too asked us to help out with the classes.

1. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan or Education for All introduced short bridge courses as a strategy to mainstream out-of-school children or never-enrolled children in formal schools.

From the beginning, AMIED and ActionAid involved the community at every stage, instead of trying to frame prescriptive solutions for them. The *maulanas* in the region hold great sway over the Meo Muslim community. *Din-e-taleem* (religious education) was considered enough. *Duniya-ki-taleem* (modern education) was considered irrelevant.

Noor Mohammed explains thus:

We involved the community at every stage, convincing them education is not against religion; it will not destroy their culture. We listened to them and showed them we respected their customs and traditions. The women in the community would come to watch through the classroom windows, to see what was being taught. They saw for themselves that their daughters were not being asked to remove their headscarves, they were not asked to dance as they had suspected. Gradually, the community came to trust us. Earlier, the community was not aware of their rights. Now, they have seen change. The awareness that they can bring about positive change gives them strength and motivates them to keep going.

One of the long-standing misconceptions about the Meo Muslims was that they were against education. As Sirajjudin, a Shiksha Panchayat member, notes:

There is a lot of misconception that Muslims do not want education. The truth is even if the children wanted to study, where are the schools, where are the teachers? At the same time, the people too had the misconception that education was not good for our children. Now they know that with education our children will not go astray. They have become more aware of the world around them and motivate other children to go to school.

Noor Mohammed explains:

[The people] were not against education but were not aware of the difference education could make in their lives. Besides, the system was weighted against them. There were hardly any schools in the area. And the ones that were there did not have adequately trained teachers or were only up to the primary level.

Even today, there are just two higher secondary schools within 20 km of Mirzapur—one in Kishangarh Bas and the other at Khanpur.

According to Asha, who has been with AMIED since its inception,

When we first started to work with the community, we couldn't sit with the men. It was frowned upon. They would taunt us saying 'what will you do?' They feared that educated girls would spoil their children. People I know back in Alwar would also tell me 'Meo Muslims slaughter cows, what will you do there ... you can't raise your voice, they don't respect women.' There were a lot of misconceptions in the beginning. Slowly, we started to talk to the men in the Meo Muslim community first and had sustained dialogues with them. When we organized meetings, at first, they would come out of courtesy.

AMIED staff visited homes and sat down with parents and persuaded them to allow girls to study up to Class V. 'Once the girls finished Class V, we would persuade the parents to allow them to study up to Class VIII. Class IX became difficult. On top of that, there was no school after Class VIII,' says Asha.

Since previously there was little interest in education within the community, the teachers took advantage of the situation. They would close the school by 11 A.M. The project staff started to collect

photographic evidence of this, which angered the teachers. Asha says, ‘They would say: “You have come to shut us down and run your own schools.” ’

According to ActionAid’s Sudatta Khuntia, who was involved from the beginning in the Shiksha Panchayat, ‘Noor Mohammed was able to mobilize people in a way that they could see that AMIED was there not to disrupt their religious moorings but to engage with the authorities for their rights. He made the lack of educational facilities a political issue, a question of deprivation and people’s rights.’

The First Shiksha Panchayat

Mirzapur saw the genesis of the Mewat Shiksha Panchayat in 2008. The forum understood that the community had been living the stereotype that ‘Muslims do not want education.’ The new awareness gained was that the solution to the problem of poor educational facilities lay with the state and that the panchayat needed to work with government officials to change the status quo. The Shiksha Panchayats were thus given orientation training to understand the district and state administration apparatus and become familiar with the different schemes and policies. When the Right to Education legislation came into place in 2009, the Shiksha Panchayat members were fully briefed on the relevant features of the act.² The forum used the knowledge to sensitize government officials and build pressure on them to provide solutions to the question of lack of educational facilities in Mewat.

The first decision that the forum took was to seek upgradation of the primary school in Mirzapur to Class VIII. The members made representations to the Block Education Officer (BEO) for the village school to be upgraded into an elementary school. When they didn’t get

2. For example, the RTE mandates that there should be a primary school within 1 km walking distance from the habitation of a child.

a convincing answer they took up the matter with the District Education Officer (DEO) and then the collector till their demand was met. When mere representations have not yielded results, the Shiksha Panchayat has resorted to more active approaches to show it means business: the forum has held demonstrations, *gheraoed* officials, taken out processions, all peacefully and only within its democratic rights.

The school in Mirzapur has now been upgraded to a secondary school. But the community is not satisfied. 'Girls can only study up to Class X. The closest higher secondary school is 18 km away in Kishangarh. We cannot send our girls so far.'

In 2005, there were less than 20 students. Today, the school has 600 children, reflecting the change in the community. But there are problems as well. The school has only six teachers. Besides, there are only six classrooms, of which one room is for mid-day meals, one room for teachers and one for the headmaster. Children very often sit in the verandah for classes. There are no trained teachers to teach science and maths for Classes 6 and above. The community is aware of this.

Shabuddin, the ex-sarpanch, says:

[A] teacher says he is an all-rounder! I ask him 'So how many MLAs are there for Rajasthan?' He replies '150'. The answer is 200 actually! How can he be an all-rounder when he cannot answer a simple general knowledge question? The elections to the State Assembly have just been held and everyone is talking about the change of government.³ And here you have a teacher who does not even know the number of MLAs!

3. The Focus Group Discussion in Mirzapur was held in December 2013 just after the State Assembly elections.

Showing the Way for Other Girls

Shabnam is 19. She has six siblings—two brothers and three sisters; an older brother died in an accident in Gurgaon. While the family is still to recover from his death, they have reason to be quite proud as well.

Shabnam is the first girl in Mirzapur who, having finished Class X in the village, is now doing her second year of a polytechnic course in electronics. She is home for the holidays and is helping her mother at home with the household chores.

‘When I finish my three-year course, I want to do a B.Tech.,’ says Shabnam. She shares a room in Alwar with another girl from Bharatpur. This is a big step for the family, allowing their daughter to study and live apart from them.

Jummy, her mother, is a Mahila Shiksha Panchayat member. She says, ‘My first daughter missed out on school. She is married and stays at home. I am happy that Shabnam is able to study. She motivates others

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‘Our children are motivated and want to study but there are very few trained teachers,’ says Sirajjudin. ‘If our children become teachers, then we don’t have to wait for outsiders to come and teach in our schools.’

The Struggle for a Model School

The Khanpur Gram Panchayat is 49 km from the Alwar district headquarters. Chor Basai is a village located in this gram panchayat.

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to send their children to school.'

It wasn't an easy decision for the family. When Shabnam's father Fajju took her to Alwar to enrol her in the polytechnic course, neighbours tittered and insinuated that they were up to 'something not good'. 'Meo Muslim girls do not study ... wonder what they do in Alwar,' was the talk.

Jummy says, 'I know my daughter and I backed her desire to study. There was nothing to be ashamed of. Even now our relatives do not like the idea of Shabnam studying. I hear them talk and ignore it.'

Shabnam's parents can ill afford her education, in fact. They spend around Rs 4000–5000 a month on her education and living expenses. But their determination is unfazed. 'She will show the way to her family once she is educated,' says her mother

Shabnam's sister, Isma, who is 16, is studying in Class XII through Open School.

Jasmal, who is the ex-sarpanch of this village, says, 'With the formation of the Shiksha Panchayat, we are now akin to a blind man receiving the gift of sight. Earlier, we did not know our rights. Now we do.'

The Shiksha Panchayat did a survey and found that in the Rath area (predominantly populated by the Yadav community) in Alwar district the teachers outnumber the students in schools. But in the Mewat area, there are 515 villages with a very poor student-teacher ratio. 'A boy struggles to tend 50 cows. How can one teacher cope with 300 students? Can four walls teach our children,' asks Jasmal.

The Shiksha Panchayat heard that a model school⁴ had been sanctioned for Chor Basai village in 2008. This news was based on the fact that the Kishangarh block was an educationally backward one and that the Mewat area did not have schools of excellence. But the joy was short-lived as media reports indicated that the model school would come up in Bas Kripal Nagar, which already had a senior secondary school. Although technically in the Mewat area, Bas Kripal Nagar has less than 10 per cent Meo Muslims.

Mewat Shiksha Panchayat members from 50 villages met and decided they would agitate to bring the model school to Chor Basai as originally planned. Raising slogans like '*Yeh Hamara Haq Hai, Hamse Mat Cheeno*' (This is our right, don't snatch it from us), the members first did a *dharna* in Alwar to highlight the issue. They then met the collector and when that did not yield any result, took the issue to the State Minority Development minister. The Shiksha Panchayat members from all 50 villages then took out a rally in Jaipur and met the Member of Parliament from Alwar, Jitendra Singh, who assured them that their demand would be met.

'We are not afraid to raise our voice. We did a *dharna* first in Kishangarh and then went to Alwar and then finally to Jaipur to meet MP Jitendra Singh to demand a model school for our area,' says Jasmal.

Some district officials tried to suggest that the land allotted for the model school in Chor Basai was not suitable, hence the decision to have the model school in Bas Kripal Nagar. But the Shiksha Panchayat members refused to accept the excuse and kept up their lobbying efforts till the order was reverted.

Finally there was a breakthrough in 2011, when the sanction for the model school to be based in Chor Basai came through. An Industrial

4. The model school scheme was launched in November 2008 by the central government and aims 'to provide quality education to talented rural children through setting up of 6,000 model schools as benchmark of excellence' at the block level, at the rate of one school per block.

Training Institute (ITI) was sanctioned as well. Since then land has been allotted and tenders issued but there has been little progress beyond this.

‘We are not seeking alms, we are demanding our rights. If the politicians and district administration do not deliver what is our due, we will fight,’ says Umardeen. ‘A Kasturba Gandhi residential school sanctioned originally for Mirzapur went to Kishangarh. This is a backward area; there are no development schemes worth the name.’

Subah Khan, another Shiksha Panchayat member, says, ‘We are worried that the model school will not come here after years of struggle. We will continue our fight.’

Noor Mohammed, the director of AMIED, is a postgraduate. He is also the husband of the sarpanch of Khanpur Gram Panchayat. About the changes in the community, he has this to say:

Earlier, the community considered the NGO [AMIED] as *qadiani*.⁵ We were living like primitive tribals. The difference now is between light and darkness. Meo Muslims are stereotyped as criminals. We feel the mainstream discrimination against us is because of our ignorance and lack of education. Our belief was that Hindi is only for Hindus, and education is not for Muslims. Now we know better. Education is our right, we have to demand it.

The earlier efforts by some NGOs to provide education appeared to have not gone down well. ‘The residential schools in the area set up by some NGOs were poorly run. We found that soaps meant for washing clothes were given to the girls to bathe. The food was of poor quality,’ says Noor Mohammed.

5. Pejorative term used to describe Ahmadiyyas or followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadian who is considered a false messiah by some sects.

Subedar Rustom Khan believes that ‘We now have a platform to demand our rights. We are not afraid to confront government officials.’

Upgrading an Elementary School

The senior school had classes only up to Class VIII. When their written representations seeking a secondary school till Class X did not work, the Shiksha Panchayat did a *dharna* for six days in front of the school in 2010. They did not allow any teacher to come into the school. When the sub-divisional magistrate and other district officials came to the school, they were *gheraoed*. The secondary school was finally sanctioned in July 2013. Class IX has been functional since then.

In this context it should be highlighted that what has helped this struggle is the fact that the Shiksha Panchayat has representatives from different castes, religions and communities—Muslim, Sikh, Scheduled Caste, Meo, Brahmin, Baniya, etc.

It may be mentioned that Musa Khera village was close to witnessing communal riots in 2005 following the murder of three Sikh members of a family, allegedly by Meo Muslims. Though personal rivalry was stated to be the reason behind the murder, attempts were made to give the murders a communal slant. The incident left the village scarred and an uneasy calm prevailed. Today there are no visible signs of the tensions in the village.

In fact, Sewa Singh, a Shiksha Panchayat member and a SMC member of the senior school, recounts:

A former headmistress of this school tried to foment trouble between the communities. She was irregular to school and when the Shiksha Panchayat confronted her, she tried to drive a wedge between us. She said, ‘You know the Meos, they don’t speak with manners.’

A Sikh rebutted her, ‘Yes, we may fight among ourselves, that’s our problem. You need to come to school on time.’

After the first struggle to upgrade the school, the Shiksha Panchayat and the SMC members are now gearing up for the next challenge. There are no trained teachers for the secondary school. Three posts are vacant. There are 63 students in Class IX, of which 27 are girls.

Thakur Singh, a member of both the SMC and ward panchayat, says, ‘The SMC now has plans to seek a separate school for girls. The present school needs to be upgraded to Class XII, with a playground.’

Since the school was upgraded, there has been another important, positive effect. Girls who had dropped out after Class VIII are now back in school to do their secondary education.

Rinky Kaur and Sakunat Khan finished elementary school in 2010. When they heard that the school was being upgraded, they convinced their parents to allow them to study again. Chamma finished Class VIII in 2009. The long gap did not deter her and she is now back at school to study in Class IX.

The Shiksha Panchayat has played a pivotal role in bringing these girls back to school.

Finally, a Primary School

Bidarka Colony is a small hamlet with approximately 50 families living here. There is no *anganwadi* in the village. The children from the village had to walk 2 km of rough path to reach the elementary school in Bidarka. After Class VIII, they had to go to either Khanpur or Kishangarh to continue in Class IX.

Getting Residential Schools to Function

One of the main reasons for the close to 90 per cent drop-out rate of Meo Muslim girls after Class V was the unavailability of upper primary schools in the vicinity of the villages. Parents did not want their girls to travel long to reach a classroom.

Two government schools that provided residential facilities for girls became gradually acceptable to the community and were considered safe. The Shiksha Panchayat has been working with the community and the government to ensure that Meo Muslim girls are able to access these schools and that these schools function well.

The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme of the central government aims to ensure access to quality education to girls of disadvantaged groups of society (belonging predominantly to the SC, ST, OBC and minority communities) by setting up residential schools with boarding facilities at the elementary level. The scheme is being implemented in educationally backward blocks of the country where

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Girls in the community were not allowed to go to Bidarka even for elementary education. It was then that the Shiksha Panchayat decided to fight for a primary school in this hamlet. With the awareness that the RTE mandates for a primary school to be located within a 1 km radius, the panchayat members took up the matter first with the BEO in Kishangarh in 2010. Not satisfied with his response, they went to Jaipur to lobby the MP from Alwar and Union Minister, Jitendra Singh.

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female rural literacy is below the national average and the gender gap in literacy is above the national average.* There is one KGBV school in Kisangarh Bas where girls from Bidarka and Baghoda study.

Similarly, at the state level, the Mewat Regional Development Board sanctioned 16 residential schools for the Mewat region (11 for Alwar and 5 for Bharatpur districts) in 2007–08. This was welcome news for the Meo Muslim community. However, though these schools were constructed in 2009, they were mired in operational problems. Since these schools were a long-pending demand of the Shiksha Panchayat, the latter took up the issue of the delay in implementation. After submitting proposals, they met the Alwar MP and state ministers to press their demand. In 2011, the Shiksha Panchayat held a state-level convention in Jaipur to register its protest. Their sustained efforts paid off and now 11 of the 16 schools are functional in Alwar district. Close to 600 girls from the Mewat region are enrolled in these schools.

*This information has been sourced from the SSA website.

After repeated representations, their unstinting resolve paid off. Bidarka Colony was finally sanctioned a primary school in 2013. While the school has been functional from August 2013, it does not have a building to house the classrooms. Undeterred, one of the villagers, Jamshed, generously offered space—a one-room house—to hold classes. Having crossed two hurdles, there were more. One teacher was sanctioned for the five classes. Amar Singh is a qualified teacher from Alwar, who after being posted to this school, has taken up residence in Khanpur, which is 10 km away.

An SMC with 15 members has been formed and while not all the members are equally aware of their role, they do know that the teacher has to come regularly and on time. A second lady teacher has been posted to the school since September 2013.

Aasu Khan is a farmer and a SMC member. 'I couldn't go to school because there was no school but we want our children to study,' he says. He is aware that the school should have three teachers as per the RTE norms. There are 73 children in the primary school, of which 37 are boys and 36 girls.

More than the struggle to get the school to their village, what is truly remarkable is the fact that more and more girls are now coming to the school as borne out by the numbers. This is a big change for the community.

Though the awareness that education is important for their girls has begun to take strong root, parents are reluctant to allow their children to walk 2 km to Bidarka for the middle school. Some of them, including Aasu Khan, prefers to send them to the Mewat residential school in Kishangarh Bas. His two daughters are enrolled in Class VII at the residential school as the RTE states that children should be enrolled in age-appropriate classes. He recalls the jibes he has had to face from the community. They have tried to dissuade him from sending his children to the residential school as they would 'be corrupted'. But Aasu Khan pays little heed. He says, 'I go to the school regularly to check on them. I am convinced they are getting a good education.'

Since then, five more girls have been enrolled in the residential school being run by the Mewat Regional Development Board.

The next challenge before the Bidarka Colony Shiksha Panchayat is getting the land sanctioned for the school building. Three *bighas* of

land has been identified, but the sub-divisional magistrate is yet to sanction the *patta*. 'The Shiksha Panchayat members spent money out of their pockets to go to Jaipur to do a *dharna* demanding a school building,' says Aasu Khan.

Key Findings

The key findings are as follows:

1. With the formation of the Shiksha Panchayat, the Meo Muslim community has made the transition from considering education as unnecessary and irrelevant to demanding education for their children as a fundamental right.
2. The change in the community's attitude towards education, especially for girls, is reflected in the number of girls now going to school beyond Class V. The fact that the girls finishing Class X are first-generation learners is yet another positive aspect.

4. Working with Different Stakeholders



The Shiksha Panchayat members realize that it is very important to involve various stakeholders who are key in taking their mission ahead. Accordingly they work with teachers, religious clerics, women, PRI members and others.

Engaging with Teachers

The Shiksha Panchayat members, some of whom are also SMC members, work closely with teachers to resolve problems in schools. While not all teachers may necessarily see the Shiksha Panchayat or the SMC as allies, the schools visited for this report were, in general, receptive to the monitoring role played by the Shiksha Panchayat.

Vijay Bhan Sharma is the headmaster of the senior school in Musa Khera and SMC head for the secondary school.¹ There is an SMC meeting in progress. Sharma says, 'We have a shortage of teachers. And even those that are appointed here are deputed for non-teaching duties.' Two teachers were deputed for election duty during the Assembly elections held in end of 2013.

The headmaster tells the SMC members present that some children are irregular at school and names them. The school has 432 children in total but the headmaster worries that there are quite a few irregular children. Two of the errant boys who are in Class IX are brought to the meeting.

The SMC decides to form a committee. Two men will come to school every day to check the attendance of children and also to do a check of the mid-day meal scheme.

The upper primary school in Maida Bas was upgraded to a secondary school in July 2013. Class IX has been functional since

1. The RTE rules though state that only parents should be made chairpersons and vice-chairpersons of SMCs.

then. Rajesh Kumari Yogi is the headmaster with MA and B.Ed. as his qualifications. He travels 35 km every day from Kishangarh Panchayat to reach the school where he has been teaching for the past nine years.

The headmaster laments the fact that there are no faculty teachers in the school to teach maths and science. The school has only five teachers for 400 students from Classes I–IX. There are only seven classrooms, and the school does not have a playground either.

The Shiksha Panchayat, which played a significant role in the upgradation of the school, intervenes when teachers are sent away on deputation. Yakub Khan, a Shiksha Panchayat member notes that ‘Two teachers were sent on deputation from this school. We first went to the BEO; then to the DEO and told him, “If you cannot send them back, we will go to the collector”, and we did.’ One teacher, who was deputed to Bhairampur, was brought back to the Maida Bas school.

Yakub is a frail, bent man in his seventies. He has advanced cataract in one eye and can barely use it, but his memory is razor sharp and he reels out the dates when the deputations took place, when the government order for upgrading the school came through, where and when demonstrations were held by the Shiksha Panchayat, etc.

Yakub recalls how, before the RTE took effect in 2010, the teachers were demanding a fee from the children, which in fact amounted to a bribe. ‘They would take something like Rs 60 for the lower primary and Rs 120 for the middle school. Once the SMC was formed, we told the teacher to return the money, which they did.’

Yogi, a teacher, acknowledges that the teachers were indeed collecting money. He says he is grateful to the Shiksha Panchayat for

No Secondary Schools, No Trained teachers

The school in Bidarka is only up to Class VIII. This constituted a problem for children like Sahida Khan, who wanted to study further. Luckily for her, her parents have been encouraging. The closest secondary school is in Baghoda, which is 6 km away. It would take more than an hour by foot to reach the school. However, the government provides bicycles for girls who finish elementary school and join Class IX. Sahida Khan and Hanshira Bano, her friend from Manoti village nearby, cycle 30 minutes through muddy tracks every day to reach school.

‘No one taught me to cycle, I learnt it myself,’ says a proud Sahida. The local people would pass rude comments and remarks like ‘So she cycles to school, she’s not going to become a collector.’ Her father, Noor Baksh, is a primary school teacher at Brisangpur, which is 11 km away. Sahida wants to study to be an engineer and her parents are supportive of her dream.

Sahida has two brothers, one in Class 9 and the other in Class 7. Both study in Kishangarh, which is 18 km away. One of Sahida’s older sisters finished elementary school but since there was no secondary school in the vicinity, she stayed at home. Her parents got her married soon after. Sahida’s two other sisters too were married before they turned 18.

Her mother Asri Bano says of Sahida, ‘What will she do sitting at home? She wants to study and we want her to study. If she passes Class X, then we will educate her further.’ The presence of the Shiksha Panchayat and the growing awareness that education

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can indeed make a difference in their children's lives is responsible for this change in Asri's attitude.

Hanshira Bano wants to become a nurse. Sahida and Hanshira have been friends for two years now since they started going to Baghoda together. Both girls couldn't get admission in the residential school at Kisangarh Bas as the seats had already been filled up.

The secondary school in Baghoda, however, has just one teacher, Raja Lal, for Classes 6 to 10 for all subjects. There were two other teachers but they have been sent away on deputation to another school. There are 143 children in Classes 6 to 10. Class X, for example, has 30 boys and only seven girls.

Classes 6 to 8 have one classroom while Classes 9 and 10 sit in one classroom. There is no toilet for the children, no drinking water. 'We don't go to the toilet during the day. We wait to go home,' says Sahida, who cycles 6 km to school. She is extremely worried as the class final exams are approaching and the textbooks for English and maths remain unintelligible to her as there is no one to teach these subjects. Her strong desire to continue her schooling is matched by the awareness that she may have to pay the price for the lack of teachers in her school.

While the problems of lack of qualified teachers and toilets continue, the school has been allotted computers that lie in one room waiting for someone to come and teach the overburdened single teacher how to use them!*

* The SSA has launched a scheme called 'Computer Literacy in Higher Secondary Schools'. Under this scheme computer education is to be introduced in all higher secondary schools in a phased manner 'to bridge the digital divide'.

the help they are extending. 'The Shiksha Panchayat is our ally. When children don't show up or are irregular, they help us bring them back to school.'

He continues, 'In 2008 before the Shiksha Panchayat was formed in this village, there were hardly any girls in the school, less than 20 per cent. But now, the boy-girl ratio is almost 50:50. This change is entirely because of the involvement of the Shiksha Panchayat.'

Religious Leaders

The *maulanas* in the Mewat region, who hold enormous clout among the Meo Muslims, feared that modern education would erode traditional religious values. But AMIED and the Shiksha Panchayat have been holding continuous dialogues with them to allay their fears. Gaining entry into a closed community and effecting changes in a traditional mindset is a daunting task. Through dialogue, a meaningful interface between religious and formal school education was created wherein both systems of education were seen as more



complementary to each other rather than adversarial. One of the measures undertaken was to stagger the *madrasa* timings to enable children to attend both school and *madrasa*. The Shiksha Panchayat convinced the *maulanas* that since they could not change the school timings, the *madrasa* timings could be shifted so that the children were able to go to both. During winter girls would go first to the *madrasa* for their religious classes before school started at 10.30 A. M. And in summer, the children would go to school between 7 A. M. and 12 noon and then go to the *madrasa* after school. Similarly, the Shiksha Panchayat addressed the question of how to make the classroom practices more culturally relevant. The Teaching Learning Methods (TLM) had pictorial depictions.² The Shiksha Panchayat came up with a simple solution: “Keep the pictures covered during prayer time. And open it during the classes!” says Noor Mohammed.

The Shiksha Panchayat has also been advocating for female teachers to be appointed to enable girl students to attend school and for Urdu to be made the medium of learning to make the schooling more culture specific.

Some of the *maulanas* are now part of the Shiksha Panchayat itself. Iqbal Khan is the *maulana* of the *madrasa* in Nyana. He is also a member of the Shiksha Panchayat. He feels children need both religious and modern education and the two can complement each other. He says, ‘If our Meo children are to benefit from the opportunities available, they need modern education.’

Boys as young as nine or ten join the *madrasa* for religious studies and leave when they turn 15 or 16. Apart from teaching the Koran, *madrasas* also teach the boys some *duniya-ki-taleem*. Since this is a

2. Islam, according to widely-held interpretations of the Hadith, proscribes the depiction of images of God, human beings or animals.

registered *madrasa*, there is a para teacher at hand to teach the boys Hindi, maths and science as per the government curriculum. There are 37 *madrasas* in the project area of 50 villages in Alwar district. Of these, 17 are registered *madrasas*.

More and more children, especially girls, are now attending school in the village located in the Musa Khera Gram Panchayat thanks to Iqbal Khan. Given that resistance to girls' education is ingrained in the community's social fabric, the relevance of the support of *maulanas* like Iqbal Khan to the Shiksha Panchayats cannot be overstated. The majority of *maulanas* in the area have now begun to see the relevance of modern education, according to AMIED.

Forum for Women

The women of Mewat may not participate so vibrantly in the Shiksha Panchayat meetings but they have their separate identity in the form of a forum to discuss matters concerning education and other social issues. In some villages, these forums are quite active too.

The Mahila Shiksha Panchayat of Jeelota, a village in Ismailpur Gram Panchayat, 35 km from Alwar, has gathered to discuss a familiar issue: alcoholism among the men. Dhano, a member, says,

We work as daily labourers in the fields belonging to Sindhi farmers. The NREGA does not function well here and the men in the village are unemployed. All they do is drink alcohol through the day. We struggled to get the liquor shop in the village closed. Our strategy worked for a while, but the shop is open again now.

Another member, Nirmala says that 'The men didn't support us in the closing of the liquor shop. We want to do a lot but we have our

limitations.'

Pista Devi is a vocal member of the Mahila Shiksha Panchayat and an SMC member. According to her,

There were irregularities in the mid-day meal scheme; rice was being taken away. We invited some media persons to check for themselves and also informed the Shiksha Panchayat. The help was making food with poor quality flour. She claimed that the chaff had vitamins! So we told her, 'Then why not feed it to your children? The government is giving money to buy flour and you don't use it.'

She recounts another instance where tablet computers were sanctioned for Class VIII students. 'The teacher told us each tablet cost Rs 6000. But we found that it cost Rs 500 less. So the teacher was planning to pocket the extra money. The SMC demanded that the teacher give us the money and we bought the tablets ourselves.'

Key Findings

The following are the key findings:

1. Teachers have come to accept the role of the Shiksha Panchayat and now view the forum as an ally in strengthening schools.
2. Many more *maulanas* are convinced that modern education is not anti-Islam. They have come to accept that parents are interested in more educational opportunities for their children.
3. Although women have a separate forum, the Mahila Shiksha Panchayat, they are yet to be recognized as critical stakeholders in education.

5. Education Binds Communities



A Shiksha Panchayat member believes, 'We may be different but when it comes to education we are one. The education of our children is important.'

Vijay Kumar is from Jeelota village. There are 400 families in this village, belonging to diverse communities, such as Sindhi, SCs, Khati, Meo, Valmiki and Nai. This diversity is fully represented in the Shiksha Panchayat and the forum acts as one to promote educational facilities for their children. Vijay says, 'It was a matter of pride for us when a Muslim girl became the first in the village to finish Class VII.'

As members of both the Shiksha Panchayat and SMC, Vijay and others are now actively involved with issues relating to the school. 'The *anganwadi* in our village was located in a house. We wanted to shift it inside the school. The teachers at first resisted. We then showed them the government order stating that *anganwadis* must be located inside the school. Finally, we got it shifted.'

Vijay continues:

My daughter came home one day and told me that her classmate was told to stand outside the class because she had asked the teacher to repeat something she couldn't understand. As an SMC member, I went up to the teacher and demanded an explanation. When I did not get a convincing answer, I spoke to the headmaster who, initially, did not take me seriously. He merely said, 'It's not your child, why are you bothered.' I persisted and warned that I would raise the matter with the sarpanch. I told him I was a Shiksha Panchayat member. The headmaster apologized and said he would ensure that the teacher would not penalize the children henceforth for asking questions.

Sirajjudin of Mirzapur says, 'Our community now understands the importance of education.'

To illustrate his point, he recounts an anecdote of a villager from Mirzapur who was looking for directions to a 'company' (office) in Gurgaon. The villager approached a passerby and asked for directions. The man told him to pay Rs 50 first. Not having a choice, the villager did so. The passerby pointed to the building in front of them and said, 'This is the company you are looking for!' 'If the villager had been literate, he wouldn't have faced this problem,' concludes Sirajjudin.

Being a Shiksha Panchayat member has given him and others an identity they are proud of. On a lighter note, Sirajjudin recounts the time he was caught by the police when he was on his motorbike and didn't have his license on him. But he had with him his Shiksha Panchayat card. On seeing it, the police let him go.



According to Asha of AMIED,

Initially, members wanted some handholding to go to meetings, to meet officials. But the orientation and training, and the experience of meeting different office bearers have given them courage. The Shiksha Panchayat and some of our field workers went to Delhi recently for a *dharna* at Jantar Mantar to demand more pension and they stayed an extra day as they felt they had work to do. A remarkable increase in confidence level!

My Daughter is a Role Model



Barkha has done her parents and her village Maida Bas proud. She is the first girl from the backward community to finish Class X. Not just that. She is also the first to complete Class XII. And now, she is the first girl in the Brisangpur Gram Panchayat to go to college.

The 17-year-old is in her first year of college at the Aryakanya College in Alwar doing a bachelor's degree

....continued ...

Azam Khan has this to say:

Some of the teachers don't know enough about the RTE provisions but the Shiksha Panchayat does. A number of teachers were demanding fees from our children. But when we came to know about the RTE

....continued.

in Arts. She studies political science, home science and Hindi literature as well as English .

Barkha has three sisters and one brother. She studied in Baghoda till Class X. Her grandparents had objected to her studying beyond Class X. Their question was 'Is she going to do a job?'

Barkha's mother's sister too was vocal in her opposition to the girl going to college. She said, 'Barkha cannot even carry 30 kg of harvested wheat on her head. At my age, even I can carry more than her. She is not going to get a job, she cannot make food even for two people, she will surely get beaten when she goes to her in-laws!'

Nasiri, Barkha's mother, though, ignored her sister's rant. Nasiri is an SMC member. 'Other girls look at Barkha and want to follow suit. I got married when I was very young. Though I want Barkha to get married in two years, I am happy she is going to college now.'

As an SMC member, Nasiri goes to the secondary school to check 'if everything is fine'. She says, 'When children are fighting among themselves and the teacher does nothing, I tell him to engage the children in something useful.'

norms, we told the teachers that it was illegal. At first, they ignored us. When they realized we were going to take up the issue with the District Education Officer, they came around to our homes and returned the money!

Akbar Khan of Bidarka Colony notes, 'There was no primary school within the 1 km radius as mandated by the RTE. Now there is one and 80 children study here.' This is the difference that the Shiksha Panchayat has made. The community is now aware of its rights and is not afraid to seek them.

Whether it is fraud in the mid-day meal scheme or misappropriation of school funds, the Shiksha Panchayat and the SMCs are able to confront wrongdoers without fear. Ratan, an SMC member from Thoss, says they are now vigilant about how school funds are being spent.

Asghar Khan of Bidarka says, 'Some teachers tried to nominate the SMC members, saying that those opposed to them would not be part of the SMC. The Shiksha Panchayat resisted it.'

The Shiksha Panchayat members belong to different religions and castes—some are Hindu, some Sikh, some Meo Muslim, some are SCs and or Other Backward Castes (OBCs)—but they are united by one cause: education.

In Musa Khera, it was the Sikh and Hindu Shiksha Panchayat members who made a representation to the BEO, requesting him to not send the only Urdu teacher away on deputation. It did not matter that there was no teacher for Hindi yet.

That education is now a priority for the community in this region is borne out by the fact that before the Assembly elections were held in November 2013, the Shiksha Panchayat invited candidates from all parties contesting the elections. Seven candidates came. 'We had but one major demand. The Shiksha Panchayat sought to know what the candidates would do to advance education in the Mewat area. We wanted to know how the MLA [Constituency Development] funds would be utilized,' says Sewa Singh. While earlier the Mewat

community was not interested much in the political trends in the country, now members of the community are keen to keep abreast of events not just in Rajasthan but elsewhere in the country also.

Jasmal says, 'The best way to make sure our children are getting educated is that the community has to be aware. We go to the school regularly and sit with the teachers so that they know we are involved.'

Haroon of AMIED says, 'Once, we had a public hearing with the collector, who sat on the floor to listen to the demands of the people. This gave them tremendous confidence.'

The people of the community were initially diffident. 'We are Meos, we only graze goats; we thought it's our fault we are behind.' That attitude has changed. Now they say, 'We want education but there are no schools, no teachers.'

Key Findings

The following are the key findings:

1. The biggest strength of the Shiksha Panchayat—at the village, cluster and block levels —is that it has members drawn from different communities and castes who are united by one cause: education.
2. The Shiksha Panchayat feels empowered as a forum to seek changes that will benefit their society. Where earlier they would be afraid to voice their opinion, now they have no hesitation in confronting office bearers to demand their rights.

6. Conclusion and Way Forward



Lessons Learnt

‘Building confidence with the community is a slow process. One wrong move can derail all the efforts that have gone in it until now,’ says Noor Mohammed.

Jacob, a senior field staff with AMIED, adds,

When we started working with the community, there was a lot of mistrust initially. The *maulanas* were a big factor. Some of them spread canards about our organization that we were *qadiani*. People used to say we were getting money from abroad, that we were missionaries. There was an air of suspicion around our work.

Another key field staff, Hasan, says, ‘The local people would abuse us. They would say “what are you doing to our children? Why are you talking to them inside the room?” They would allege that we were taking films of the girls and sending it to people abroad.’

The bridge course that was conducted in 2005–06 slowly changed the mindset of the community members, especially when they saw that the girls were learning, and learning fast. However, there was a tense period when rumours were spread about the staff photographing the girls. The community stopped sending its girls to the bridge course. With the help of some committed Shiksha Panchayat members, AMIED and ActionAid organized a community interface where some of the girls were asked to present their views about the bridge course. The girls firmly dismissed all charges against the NGO and said they were, in fact, learning from the bridge course. The community then allowed the girls to go back to the school.

Both ActionAid and AMIED staff voice the opinion that experience with the Mewat Shiksha Panchayat model has taught them

several lessons during the course of the project. For one, it was a misconception that Meo Muslims did not realize the importance of education. The reality was that they were not aware of their rights, how important these rights were and how to access them.

One key lesson for the project staff was that the community members had to learn to trust that ActionAid and AMIED were not there to dictate to them and that their customs, beliefs and traditions would be respected. According to the project staff,

You can place suggestions on why education is important. It is up to the community to choose. Otherwise, if you go to them and say this is the road, take it, they will listen to you out of respect but not follow it. They observe us closely. Only if we win their confidence can we move ahead.

Another key learning for the project members was to remember that they were 'only facilitators'. 'We merely facilitated in helping the Mewat community realize the power of the collective. The hesitation in them was how to reconcile religion with education. Once they were convinced that education did not conflict with their religious beliefs there was no stopping them.'

The Shiksha Panchayat gave the community members a platform to raise their voice from the village level right up to the state level. It gave them confidence and a feeling of strength. They came to know that there were others like them to share stories with and to learn from. The members could see the changes happening due to their collective voice.

Though the project had a focus on Meo Muslims, there was a conscious decision to focus on the problems of Mewat. This inclusiveness was advantageous for Meo Muslims. If the

project had isolated them for programmes, it would have been counterproductive. When all communities work together, they are strengthened. The project wanted the Meos to focus on problems where, together with other communities, they could look for solutions.

Key Good Practices

The Shiksha Panchayat has struggled in many ways to bring about changes; initial small victories have given it strength to fight bigger battles for the educational rights of children. In the final analysis, the following key good practices can be derived:

1. The project did not seek to provide prescriptive solutions to the community. AMIED and ActionAid chose the path of seeking dialogue, listening to and understanding the community's views on the subject of education, and facilitating the process of self-mobilization.
2. The project kept in mind the cultural and religious specificities of the Mewat region and worked within those parameters even while working to convince the community that *din-e-taleem* and *duniya-ki-taleem* could be complementary. This approach helped gain the confidence of the community.
3. The project mobilized the Mewat Shiksha Panchayat, equipped it with knowledge of various schemes, policies and legislation, and provided training so that the Shiksha Panchayat took gradual ownership in seeking informed solutions to the issues around access to education.
4. AMIED and ActionAid have played, and continue to play, a facilitator's role but it is the Mewat Shiksha Panchayat that is at the forefront, seeing the lack of schools and teachers as a

problem it has to solve. With its efforts yielding success, the Shiksha Panchayat has gained confidence and is now looking at other issues besides education.

5. The Shiksha Panchayat has members from all castes and religions. This has created a spirit of inclusiveness and the people as a whole have felt that they are addressing the problems of Mewat and seeking solutions that benefit all of Mewat and not just one community.
6. The formation of different tiers of the Shiksha Panchayat from the village to the district level has afforded a sense of kinship, through sharing stories, exchanging ideas and drawing on the collective experience. The strength in numbers gives the forum greater confidence that 'together' they can achieve more.

Way Ahead

The Mewat Shiksha Panchayat has travelled a considerable distance since its formation in 2008. It has fought and won some hard battles to secure educational facilities for the children of Mewat. Yet, there are more battles ahead—schools to be opened, adequate, qualified teachers for the schools, more classrooms; the list is long. Can the Shiksha Panchayat continue its fight?

Umardeen of Maida Bas says, 'Every village has people who can carry forward the fight.'

Jasmal says, 'We should continue the fight even if the NGO is not around. Only if we work together as a community can we bring change.'

The village Shiksha Panchayats are already drawing support and learning from each other. For example, a school teacher in Nyana

tried to dismiss the SMC head as he asked questions about how funds were being spent, about irregularities in the mid-day meal scheme, etc. The SMC head, who refused to sign the cheques that the teacher brought to him, took the matter to the village Shiksha Panchayat who then invited panchayat members from Musa Khera and the BEO to seek a solution.

When the Shiksha Panchayat meets other stakeholders such as government officials, teachers and clerics, they exchange information, overcome communication barriers, and understand and appreciate each other's views on problems related to education, and make informed choices through deliberative processes. The determination of the Shiksha Panchayat to change the status quo in Mewat holds the key to the sustainability of this model.

ActionAid staff members have more ideas for the future.

Now that the initial challenges of engaging with the community are over, the Shiksha Panchayat is taking up issues of school education on its own. We must now think of creating a forum for adolescent girls so that they could discuss issues like early marriage, the effect it has on young girls, etc. Women too should find more of a voice in discussing issues around education.

AMIED and ActionAid plan to continue to play a facilitator's role. In 2014, the focus will be on training block-level Shiksha Panchayat members so they can go back and train the cluster members. 'Our focus will be on spreading this model of Shiksha Panchayat and give support so as to increase awareness of people's rights and the schemes available,' says Noor Mohammed. 'We can only be catalysts, the community has to take charge and want change.'

And change the Meos do seek. They are determined to shrug off the stereotypes about them. They have recently submitted a memorandum to the collector for changing the name *Chor Basai* to *Ser Basai*, as the former has a negative connotation.



Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED)

is a voluntary, non-profit and non-government organization that firmly believes that education plays a significant role in socio-economic development and cultural enrichment of the society and individuals. Presently AMIED is working in three blocks of Alwar district in Rajasthan. These are Ramgarh, Kishengarh Bas and Tijara. AMIED has adopted more than 110 villages.

Child Rights Focus (CRF) is a knowledge initiative hosted by ActionAid Association to further the cause of the complete realization of child rights in India. CRF seeks to capture learnings from child-targeted interventions in India and from across the world, to strengthen and build advocacy efforts. CRF strives to positively impact policy, programmes and institutions for the benefit of all children and especially those from excluded groups, communities and sections of society.

ActionAid India (AAI) is part of a global federation and a full affiliate of ActionAid International that is present in over 40 countries worldwide. Since 1972, the poor and the excluded have been at the centre of the AAI discourse and actions in India. In 2006, AAI was registered as an Indian organization called ActionAid Association. AAI is governed by an independent General Assembly and a Governing Board. ActionAid India works in 24 states and 1 union territory of India. AAI works with the poorest and the marginalized in the most inaccessible areas, in partnership with several grassroots organizations, civil society groups and platforms.

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