

Bridging the Gaps in Girls' Education

The Case of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs)

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Abstract

Education for girls has been a high priority for the Government of India. With the aim of targeting the pockets where girls' education is lagging, the Government of India launched Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme in 2004 for setting up residential schools at upper primary level for girls belonging to the SC, ST, OBC and minorities in difficult areas. The study aims at understanding the motivations and perceptions of young girls studying in selected KGBVs. The major stakeholders of the scheme are the teachers and wardens of the KGBVs, parents of girls studying in KGBVs, and the local NGO officials were also interviewed to gain a holistic perspective about the KGBVs.

INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore viewed education as 'a right which enables individuals and communities to act on reflection'. Education is one of the important pillars of development. Education adds value to a person's

life and plays a crucial role in her/his overall development. It also adds tremendous value to society at the macro level. There is a strong correlation between lack of literacy and poverty, both in the economic sense and in the broader sense of

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deprivation of capabilities (Kumar, Saha and Sharma, 2012).

Despite considerable improvement in the literacy status over the last few years, India is home to the largest number of illiterate people in the world. According to UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report 2006, out of 771 million illiterate people in the world, 268 million (nearly one-third) were estimated to be in India. Female literacy is of vital importance for the future of the nation. It not only helps in the development of half of the human resources, but in improving the quality of life at home and outside. Acquisition of education by women empowers her to think positively, take proper decisions about her living and the society and acquire other skills that can empower her economically, politically and socially. Research evidence also suggests that educated women not only tend to promote education of their girl children, but can also provide better guidance to their children.

Since 2005–06, there has been nearly a threefold increase in spending on elementary education in India through the SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan). Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) and National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) are now part of SSA. The data shows that there have been significant improvements in the education index of most backward states, with the country registering a change of 62 percentage points from 1999–2000 to

2011–12, which was also indicative of a convergence of literacy rates across marginalised groups with the national average. Further, there have been improvements in the access of SC girls to primary education and a decrease in the gender gap in education at the primary level. There is a need to fix the gender gap in education at the middle school level now (Adhikari and Salam, 2013).

The Government of India launched two focused interventions for girls—the National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) and the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)—to reach out to girls from marginalised social groups in over 3,282 educationally backward blocks in the country where the female rural literacy is below the national average and the gender gap in literacy is above the national average (Amin, Awasthi and Chaudhary, 2012). The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme was launched in August, 2004 for setting up residential schools at upper primary level for girls belonging predominantly to the SC, ST, OBC and minorities in difficult areas. Initially it ran as a separate scheme, but was merged with the SSA programme with effect from 1 April 2007. With the RTE Act, 2009 coming into force with effect from 1 April 2010, and the SSA framework of implementation being revised to correspond to the RTE Act, the KGBV component of SSA was also implemented in the overall context of child rights and child entitlements and in harmony with the spirit and

stipulations of the Act (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, 2011). KGBVs are opened in Educationally Backward Blocks (EBBs), previously defined on a composite criterion of blocks with a rural female literacy rate below the national average (46.13%, Census 2011) and gender gap in literacy higher than the national average (21.59%, Census 2011). Within these blocks, priority was given to areas with concentration of tribal population, and/or with large number of girls out of school, or with concentration of SC, ST, OBC and minority populations and areas with a large number of small, scattered habitations that do not qualify for a school. The criteria of eligible blocks were revised with effect from 1 April 2008 to include the backward blocks with rural female literacy below 30 per cent and towns/cities having minority concentration (as per the list identified by Ministry of Minority Affairs) with female literacy rate below the national average (53.67%, Census 2011).

The objective of KGBV is to ensure access and quality education to girls from disadvantaged groups by setting up residential schools at upper primary level. The launching of KGBVs was a fundamental step by the Government of India to reach the unreached and make their lives better. With the help of these target-oriented interventions, the number of educational institutions has increased over the years, resulting in maximum area coverage besides decreasing the average distance per school. According to a study reported

by *Economic and Political Weekly*, in West Bengal the KGBV scheme seemed to be effective in making the deprived group to rise up to the level of general group in case of Self Efficacy and Intrinsic Value (Jhamb, Mishra and Sinha, 2012). Despite these achievements, the problem and challenges still remain for Dalit girls. Studies suggest they include the lack of connecting roads and long distances between home and school, high incidence of domestic work and child labour, early marriage and childbirth, poor school infrastructure and restricted choice to continue education. The absence of adequate good quality residential schools for Dalit girls and lower expectation of returns from their education are also well established (Kotwal and Nafees, 2014).

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan or 'Education for All' programme recognises that ensuring girls' education requires changes not only in the education system but also in societal norms and attitudes. Girls' education has suffered for many reasons in our society. As Amin et al. (2012) expressed that now through KGBV, a two-pronged gender strategy has therefore been adopted, to make the education system responsive to the needs of the girls through targeted interventions which serve as a pull factor to enhance access and retention of girls in schools and on the other hand, to generate a community demand for girls' education through training and mobilisation.

To take stock of the progress made and the limiting factors, the National Consultation on Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) Scheme was held in 2008. The Consultation process included Ministry of Human Resource Development, State Project Directors, eminent academicians, representatives of non-governmental organisations and various stakeholders of the scheme like students, teachers and wardens of KGBVs, etc. The deliberations pointed out the problems in the mindset of people about sending their daughters to school and a large gap in the training of teachers for such schools. The concerns were also raised about low participation of Muslim girls, and inadequate infrastructure in the schools. The suggestions put forth were to upgrade KGBVs to the secondary level as parents and students remain concerned about future opportunities after passing out of KGBV and upgrading it to the secondary level will help girls to at least finish their schooling (NCERT, 2008). It was indicated that NGOs play an important role in increasing the enrolment of girls in such schools and their counseling and training sessions with girls help them become aware of the benefits of education and its need for their better future. Also there were concerns like absence of mechanism for the redress of abuse faced by girls, lack of adequate infrastructure facilities and uncertainty in future of girls who pass out of KGBV. Mandate to evaluate such schemes have been

put up and taken forward by the UN agencies.

This exploratory and a micro study was planned with both the current students and those who have passed out, and the other major stakeholders of the scheme—the teachers and wardens and the local bodies like Panchayat representatives and local NGOs. The study was undertaken to understand the strengths and limitations of KGBVs in providing opportunity to young girls to pursue middle school education. The specific objectives were to assess the quality of education and infrastructure facilities available in the selected KGBVs. The study also aimed at examining the perceptions of girls about the advantages of studying in such schools and to know about their future aspirations. The study also probed about the problems faced by them while studying at KGBVs. In order to find out the influence of these schools on their lives, the girls who had passed out in the last two years were also interviewed. To understand the perceptions of concerned teachers, parents, wardens and local NGOs about the strengths and weaknesses of KGBVs, interviews were conducted.

According to the data procured from Census of 2011, the State of Rajasthan had low female literacy rate and a large area under Udaipur district was occupied by Scheduled Tribes. It was appropriate to choose it to understand the influence of KGBVs in facilitating girls' education

and hence was selected as the locale for the study. According to the data obtained from Ministry of Human Resource Development, there are total nine KGBVs in the nine blocks of Udaipur district. The selected KGBVs were from Salumber and Girva blocks of Udaipur. These two blocks were chosen purposively with the help of NGO Vishakha as they have been working in the field of education since many years and their contribution towards providing training and counseling to adolescent girls has helped immensely towards reducing the dropout rates of girls in school.

The sample consisted of 60 girls with 20 girls chosen from each school for a focus group discussion, 10 girls each from the schools studying in senior-most class of the selected schools for understanding their future aspirations. In addition to girl students, 30 other stakeholders were included in the study for understanding their perspectives about the overall impact of the schools, i.e., teachers and hostel wardens, parents of the students currently enrolled and local NGO officials and 6 girls who have passed out from the selected KGBVs in order to assess the influence of school environment in shaping their career aspirations and what benefits accrued to these girls after studying in these schools.

Focused group discussions were conducted to ascertain the awareness level of the benefits of the scheme among girls, the infrastructure and

physical conditions of the schools and the quality of education provided in the school was probed. In-depth interviews were conducted to ascertain future aspirations of the girls studying in the schools. The teachers were asked about their perceptions of own competence, curriculum and facilities for co-curricular activities present in the school and also about the future scope for the girl students. Parents were asked about the usefulness of such schools for preparing their young daughters for further education and employment. Interviews were also conducted with the passout girls to get an idea about their personal and professional life. These helped to assess their achievements and present conditions in terms of education. It also provided a glimpse of the effect of KGBVs on the life of young girls.

Schools' infrastructure and facilities were observed against the norms mentioned in the scheme. Checklists were prepared to examine the quality of services and infrastructure facilities against the established norms. The major findings of the study have been discussed next.

PERCEPTIONS OF PRESENT STUDENTS ABOUT QUALITY OF EDUCATION, INFRASTRUCTURE FACILITIES, ADVANTAGES AND PROBLEMS OF STUDYING IN KGBVs

For understanding the perceptions of girls currently enrolled in schools,

20 girls from each school were chosen and two focus group discussions were conducted with them. Further in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 girls from each school. The findings indicated that the students in the KGBVs of Salumber and Girva blocks came from families belonging to SC (50%), followed by OBC (28.3%) and ST (25%) communities which was quite high as compared to other mainstream schools in Udaipur (DISE, 2012). This indicated that KGBVs justify their existence for this subset of population, i.e., girls from more vulnerable groups get an opportunity to study in KGBVs. The findings also highlight that 80 per cent girls came from farming families. Hence it is evident that for girls from these families who have been traditionally resistant to sending their daughters to residential schools have found an opportunity to study and hope for a better future due to KGBVs. The enrolment data revealed that maximum number of girls entered these schools in Class VI at the age of about 11–12 years, indicating a gap of about one year after they pass out of Class V or after they dropout from their previous school. The findings indicate that there are many reasons for which the girls like to be in a KGBV. Free education and residential facilities were the two major attractions for most of these girls from the economically impoverished families. The other reasons expressed included desire

to study for a better future as articulated by almost 34 per cent of the girls, almost 50 per cent of the girls also said they like spending time with friends, get an opportunity to play games and are fond of their teachers. One major disliked factor about the school was unhealthy food at the hostel. National Consultation on KGBVs organised in 2009, also raised a concern about low budget allocation for health and nutrition. The per capita grant for daily maintenance of KGBV girls is ₹ 25 per head which is very low. Another issue reported by the girls was about the problem of infrastructure. Many of them complained about inadequate beddings, poor condition of washrooms, poor quality of kitchen and utensils and lack of adequate security provisions. It was also found that some girls dropped out before reaching the final grade of the KGBVs largely due to lack of adequate infrastructure and lack of motivation and interest. For many of the girls, food and residential facilities at the schools were the attraction to join and when the schools lacked in these, some dropped out.

Quality of education was good as mentioned by the girls. They praised their teachers for their patience and for motivating them to study. The students were satisfied with the timetable as it was well-planned with sports period each week for recreation which gave them a break from their class schedule.

The girls were contended with the teacher–student ratio or rather had limited view due to limited experience. They were happy that they could study various subjects including English. About 70 per cent of the students also mentioned that they were able to understand what was taught in class and did not need any guidance for homework.

FUTURE ASPIRATIONS OF THE GIRLS STUDYING IN THE SELECTED KGBVs

More than half of the students wanted to study further after finishing schooling at KGBVs, so these girls were hopeful about future education and a better future. The KGBVs encouraged them to study further and made them confident. The teachers play a key role in motivating the girls to study further. Around 30 per cent of girls said they will consult their parents also to decide about their future.

Almost all the girls wanted to join a mainstream school after KGBV to pursue higher education and were also very hopeful that their parents would support them. The girls were little hesitant about adjusting in family back after this as most of them had been staying at residential school for more than two years. The girls were also asked at what age would they like to marry. Very interestingly, all the girls mentioned they had not thought about it and neither did their parents mention it to them. This was a very welcome change.

PERCEPTIONS OF CONCERNED TEACHERS, PARENTS, WARDENS AND THE LOCAL NGOs ABOUT THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF KGBVs

It was reported that there was generally lack of awareness about the KGBV scheme, parents and teachers were not aware about the schools and got to know from their neighbours or friends.

Only 50 per cent of the teachers reported that they faced an interview or had received any training before joining the school. Most of them got to know about the mission and vision of KGBVs only after joining and interacting with other teachers and students. They only knew that they were being appointed for teaching in a residential school. There was no information provided to them about the exact purpose of the KGBVs. Adding to these concerns, the teachers also mentioned that they were ignorant of the funding pattern of the schools and their inability to make any changes needed. They strongly felt a need for regular meetings with the officials to discuss their problems and concerns.

Almost all the hostel wardens on being asked about quality of infrastructure mentioned it to be inadequate. They mentioned about the shortage of beddings, poor quality of washrooms and also unavailability of proper cooking facilities in the kitchens. This clearly shows lack of adequate infrastructure in KGBVs.

Wardens also mentioned that it is quite difficult for them to deal with the new batch of girls every year, as they have to help them with everything from clothes to food. Also, they find it quite difficult to convince the girls and their parents about staying away from family and studying for their future. Wardens mentioned festivals and special occasions like Independence Day and Republic Day which are celebrated involving the girls in preparations and for their recreation, which is thoroughly enjoyed by the students and offers a great learning opportunity.

Parents mentioned that the main reason for admitting their daughters to KGBVs was good performance by their older children and neighbours' children who had studied at KGBVs. This indicates that parents were not aware about the benefits of the school; they decided only after getting to know from their relatives, neighbours or friends. Similar findings were reported by All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) in 2012–13 in Bihar, which indicated that the most marginalised groups in the society are unaware about the KGBV scheme in Bihar and the parents do not expect their daughters to do anything else other than taking care of their younger siblings (Kotwal and Nafees, 2014). They mentioned that security arrangements are not very good at school and their daughters often mention not feeling safe at school. Despite these limitations, parents wanted their daughters to

continue schooling and a few of them also mentioned that they will support their daughters if they go for higher education or job.

The NGO officials had some distinct observations. Most of the NGO workers had been working for more than two years. Their two main concerns with the KGBVs were inadequate infrastructure and student–teacher ratio. They mentioned about shortage of bedding due to which generally two students have to share a bed. Other problems reported were lack of cooking facility in the kitchen and use of kerosene stoves for cooking. They also mentioned security problems due to absence of security personnel for duty. Their second concern was the teacher–student ratio as there are generally four to five teachers for more than 120 girls, and therefore there is little scope for individual attention. The registers were not maintained properly. Another vital concern raised by them was regarding future opportunities for girls after passing out of the schools were not very well discussed with the students or their parents and as a result very few girls were able to pursue education after leaving KGBVs.

In-depth interviews with the girls who had finished their schooling at KGBVs indicated that some of them were pursuing education and some of their seniors were pursuing careers and the biggest strength was that the girls felt that their teachers took extra care to ensure good teaching in the schools. The KGBVs definitely seemed

to offer a very important role for the betterment of future of these girls. Hence, based on the present study, some of suggestions for effective implementation and mass reach of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme can be generating awareness through Panchayats at the block and village levels, wall writings and radio jingles in the local dialect about the importance of sending girls to the KGBVs and their impact on the lives of the girls. There is a need for proper training of teachers and

other staff members of the school including orientation about the vision and mission of KGBVs among the officials and parents to enhance their motivation. There is a greater need to improve the infrastructure and security facilities at KGBVs. Regular monitoring and discussions with administrators at the district level can help to elicit problems and finding solutions, can make these schools an effective catalyst for girls' education in the educationally backward districts of the country.

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