

Promoting secondary education among girls from educationally backward blocks: The case of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya

BIDISHA DAS*¹ AND SARITA ANAND²

¹P.G. Research Scholar and ²Associate Professor

Department of Development Communication and Extension, Lady Irwin College
Delhi University, New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

Education of girls has been a high priority of 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 aimed at understanding the motivations and perceptions of young girls studying in the selected KGBVs and their preparedness to pursue secondary education. The major stakeholders of the scheme that is the girl students, teachers and wardens of the KGBVs, parents of girls studying in KGBVs and the local NGO officials involved in educational efforts were interviewed to gain a holistic perspective about the selected KGBV schools

Key Words : Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBVs), Girls' education, Gender and education

INTRODUCTION

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 also can provide better guidance to their children.

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 1st April, 2007. The criteria of

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eligible blocks were revised with effect from 1st April, 2008 to include the backward blocks with rural female literacy below 30% 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 launching of KGBVs was a fundamental step by the Indian Government to reach the unreached and make their lives better. 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 *et al.*, 2012).

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan or 'Education for All' program recognizes that ensuring girl's 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 mobilization.

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 Organizations and various stakeholders of the scheme like students, teachers and warden of KGBVs etc. The deliberations pointed out the problems in mind set of people about sending their daughters to school and a large gap in the training of teachers for such schools. 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).

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 girl at least finish their schooling (NCERT, 2008). It was indicated that NGOs play an important role in increasing the enrollment of girls in such schools and their counseling and training sessions with girls help them become aware of the benefits of education and the 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 study was planned with the current students, those who have passed out, and the other major stakeholders of the scheme the teachers and wardens and the local bodies like Panchayat representative and local NGOs. The study was undertaken with the objectives of assessing 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 and problems of studying in KGBVs and to know about their future preparedness to continue education. In order to find out the influence of these schools, 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 2011, Rajasthan has had low female literacy rates and Udaipur being inhabited majorly by tribal population, it was considered to be appropriate to undertake a research to examine an effort being made by opening KGBVs to promote smooth transition into secondary education of girls after finishing primary education in the village schools. For this, the data obtained from Ministry of Human Resource Development indicated there are total of 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 sixty (60) girls with twenty (20) girls chosen from each school for a focus group discussion, ten (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, thirty (30) other stakeholders were also 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 six (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.

For the purpose of data collection focus 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 own competence, curriculum, and facilities for co-curricular activities present in the school and also about the future scope for students. Parents were asked about the usefulness of such schools for preparing young girls for further education and employment. Interviews were also conducted with the pass out girls to get an idea about their personal and professional life. These helped to assess their achievements and present conditions in terms of education. Also gave us a fair idea about the effect of KGBVs on the life of young girls.

Schools during visits were observed for the facilities they possessed 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 here:

Perceptions of present students about quality of education, infrastructure facilities, advantages and problems of studying KGBVs :

For understanding the perceptions of girls currently enrolled in schools, twenty girls from each schools were chosen and two focus group discussions were conducted with them. Further in-depth interviews were conducted with ten (10) girls from each school. The

findings indicated that the students in the KGBVs of Salumber and Girva block were from SC (50 %), followed by OBC (28.3%) and ST (25%) families which was quite high as compared to other mainstream schools in Udaipur (DISE, 2012). This indicated that KGBVs justify their existence for this sub-set of population *i.e.* girls from more vulnerable groups get an opportunity to study in KGBVs. The findings also highlights that 80% 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 enrollment 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 school. Free education and residential facility was a major attraction for most of these girls from the economically impoverished families. The other reasons expressed included desire to study for a better future (34%) of the girls, almost 50% of the girls also said they like spending time with friends, get an opportunity to play games and were fond of their teachers. One major disliked factor about the school was food at the hostel.

National Consultation on KGBVs organized 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 Rs. 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 but 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 time table as it was well planned with sports period each week, for recreation which gave them a break from their class schedule.

The girls were contented with the teacher student ratio. They were happy that they could study various subjects including English. 70% of the students also mentioned they are able to understand what is being taught in class and did not need any guidance for homework.

Future aspirations to continue secondary education :

More than half the students wanted to study further after finishing education 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% 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 staying in a hostel as most of them had been staying at residential school for more than two years.

Perceptions of concerned teachers, parents, wardens and local NGOs about the strengths and weaknesses of KGBVs :

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

Only 50% of the teachers reported that they faced an interview and received 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 KGBV schools. 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 of 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 KGBVs lack adequate infrastructure.

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 occasions are celebrated involving the girls in preparations and for their recreation, which is thoroughly enjoyed by the students and offers a great learning opportunity to them.

Parents mentioned the main reason for admitting their daughters to KGBVs was good performance by their older children or friends' children who studied at KGBVs. This indicates parents were not aware about the benefits of the school, they decided only after getting to know from their relatives or friends. Similar findings were reported by All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) in 2012-13 in Bihar, which indicated that the most marginalized 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 security arrangements are not very good at school and their daughters often mention not feeling safe at school. Apart from this, a few parents mentioned 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 actually pursue education.

In-depth interviews with the passed out girls indicated that some of them were pursuing their education and some of their seniors were pursuing careers too and according to them the biggest strength of KGBVs was 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 conducted, some of suggestions for effective implementation and expand the reach of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme (KGBVs) can be through generating awareness through Panchyats 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 about the vision and mission of KGBVs. There is a greater need to improve the infrastructure and security facilities at KGBVs. Regular monitoring and discussions with the teachers 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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