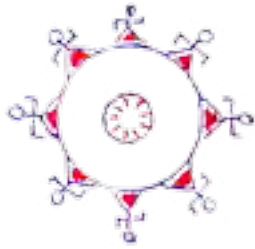


# Beyond Novella

...memoirs of change





A far and long stretch of nothingness epitomised by sand infinite— the Thar. A small hamlet for living, Well for water, Sun and more sun, then stars and a tiny lamp for light, a hard-laboured field and a herd for living.

Being born as girls in this society their fate was submitted to a lifelong subservience— first to the father and for the rest of the life to the man they are to be married off to.

The girl married off early and the family - in want of a son. The woman, already reduced to a voiceless entity, and just then, happens the next 'girl'.

While that story is ubiquitous, there began weaving another story in this desert of the world. Girls played, they laughed, they learnt and sang songs of their lives; and amidst this they finished formal primary education within a period of six months.

It all started 15 years ago. And so began the journey of the Balika Shivirs.



With inspiring memories of Shri Anil Bordia

In gratitude to the tireless efforts of  
Teachers and Volunteers who motivated  
girls and their families,  
in these expanses of the Thar





“I was amazed to see so many girls together in the desert.  
I had never seen so many girls at once.  
All the songs and the laughter... Shivir was my home.”

Manori



“My courage, strength and my determination, I owe it  
all to the Shivir. I love my freedom.  
Shivir further broadened horizons for me.”

Sweety



“Had I never been to the Shivir, I would have spent  
all my life in my backyard. If today I am studying on my own  
in Bikaner, it is only because of Shivir.”

Vidya



“I am the only one educated in all of my village.  
Life would have been bound to sheep grazing and  
looking after children. But today I work for village betterment”

Salema



# Beyond Novella

... memoirs of change



Urmul

# Beyond Novella

... memoirs of change



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Sketches and Illustrations by girls from the Balika Shivrns in Rajasthan, India

Designed at Desert Resource Centre, Urmul Trust

Published by Arvind Ojha, Urmul Trust, Rajasthan, India

Printed at Print Vision Pvt. Ltd, Ahmedabad

First Edition, 2013, India

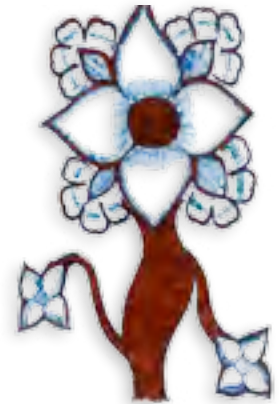
We extend our very warm gratitude to Unicef India for financially supporting the research and development for this book.



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## Preface

*Balika Shikshan Shivir* or Residential Education Camps has been a major education movement facilitated by various agencies in Rajasthan including Urmul, Lok Jumbish and Doosra Dashak. These were bridge camps for girls who had either dropped-out of school or never had the opportunity to formal education. These were much more than just classroom teaching. They focused on mould-

ing the personalities of the girls- enabling them to identify their possibilities, recognizing the inequalities, finding their voice and exercising their rights. Between 1995 and 2010, thousands of girls in hundreds of these camps changed the course of their lives towards a confident future. The *Shivir* was an effort to impact the entire discourse of women education from opportunities to access, and attitudes to the

delivery. It phenomenally changed the ways education for girl was looked at and delivered in desert society and state of Rajasthan. It resulted in an attitude change among the communities; challenged and thus tweaked the mainstream education system; brought the education opportunities within the reach of most marginalized girls and, most importantly, developed the confidence among thousands of girls that they could be the change as well as a change maker.

The first part of this book aims at tracing the scope, processes and eventual outcomes of the Balika Shivirs. It is a narrative of how a planned intervention, passionately executed brings about a long-term generational change in the entire socio-system. What the girls have achieved is surely a tale of great learning, experience and inspiration for systemic, intellectual, academic or project-based application and adaptation. It is something we can draw lessons from for a much needed introspection and innovation in education. It is a model for scaling-up, fine-tuning, and perhaps humanizing a whole lot of concurrent programmes.

As girls' reminisce the times, their experiences bring to life the internalizing of their learning. Today, they steadfastly interact with the society, knowing they are the ones shaping it through their families,

hamlets and villages spread in the sand. This is a compilation of their journeys and of their experiences while they strive to mark a change in their respective systems. Sometimes struggling, sometimes striking, the girls have come a long way in an ongoing journey, in the last fifteen years.

The second part of this book, sketches the lives of eleven young girls who have grown into amazingly strong and smart women. These girls participated in different camps at different times. They belong to varied age groups, and accordingly so range their experiences and stories. Yet what brings them together is their deep-rooted spirit and wonderful memories from the Shivar they once attended. Journeying through ups and downs while painting their lives with hues of struggle, endurance, audacity, success and celebration. These girls have come travelling far-far long. So many memories, so many stories foster them. Marking a battle of existence, survival and growth of womanhood not only among themselves but also in the society and the systems. These are just few of the in-numerous stories of desert-rains from the Thar.

Deepika Nayyar  
August, 2012



# Part one

the ideation, process and the journey of Balika Shivar







# The Thar desert

Water is scarce here. It is the way of living. The climate is so harsh that it tests the strongest of the individuals. Intense sandstorms of summers and bone-chilling winds of winter sets the range of weather. Sheep and cattle grazing, in sands boundless, is work. With little options to life and livelihood, life here is a daily struggle. This is the Thar Desert- one of the oldest and the ninth largest subtropical desert of the world.

The population is dense but sporadically disbursed across the region and with seasons, it shuttles between village and hamlet. The rain-dependent agriculture yields barely enough. The food, therefore, hardly suffices the needs of the people with large families and the opportunity cost to con-

vert it to currency becomes exorbitantly high. This results in lesser prospects to break the vicious cycle, characterizing extremely low per capita income.

The access to services is mostly either obstructed or missing. The road that brings basic services of health, education, childcare, livelihood and other welfare-state schemes rarely seems to reach villages in interiors of Thar. Even when it does, the ride is never an easy one - if there is a Primary Health Centre there is no nurse; if there is *Anganwadi* there is seldom an anganwadi worker; where there is school, there may be a teacher- missing...

Intrinsic human concerns like childcare or women health remain in the unacknowledged gaps. Adolescence becomes

an unidentified and undefined eventuality, coloured with cavities of information or the wrongly placed ones, eventually, leading to a weakly potent adult society.

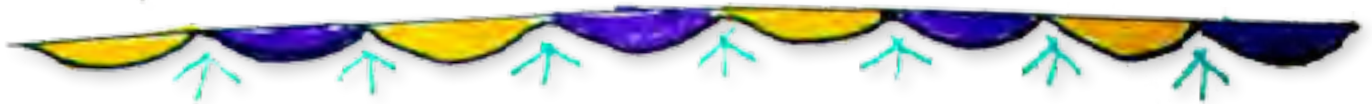
Extending the physical and systemic disparities, the village-societies are divided in handed-down feudalistic structures. The divisions going down in order of creed, caste, class, are apparent in ways the resources are used, services are accessed and the aspirations realized. The patriarchal makeup of the community deepens disparities in many ways like preference for male child, women subservience, lack of opportunities for girls' education, maternal and infant mortality. These complexities further manifest in child marriage, school dropout, purdah system and vio-

lence against women. Woman here is the victim of the victims- the weakest among the weak. She is marginalized in so many ways. The harsh-living scenarios couple with no-literacy and little opportunities for a woman to be an earning member in the family. The social milieu, intensified by no growth opportunities, positions an interlocking that binds her in a little space to think, let alone voice her concerns and voice them her way.

In this continues the life, as grows the desert itself. This has been the desert of Thar for ages...

*Dry, harsh, testing, barely moist and rigidly masculine.*





# Balika Shivar

...a beginning

The last decade of the 20th century was a period of tremendous transitions. The age-old discriminations based on gender - largely unacknowledged so far - were finally coming out of personal spaces to national numbers and indices. The 1991 Census, for the first time, openly accepted the falling sex ratio and raised alarms for the policy levels to take substantial action. There were nine hundred and twenty-seven women to every thousand men, with even wider gaps in the child-sex ratio in India.

Internationally too, this was shaping up as a landmark period for gender discourses. The Beijing Conference in 1995, for the first time in its scale, brought together various arguments- setting contexts on a common platform. It enabled a lens that shifted focus on gender. This played a pivotal role in the way development was to be approached. Here forth, gender was to become the thrust perspective for policy and implementation action.

This was the time of shifting gears in India. New ideas, new experiments, new approaches and new excitement- all were seeing spaces opening up for women. There was a surge of women coming forth to command their spaces in public. This 'New Indian Woman' was educated, resilient, self-dependent and was establishing herself as an equal. Nonetheless, significant population living in the rural villages remained largely disconnected with this mass movement.

The 'New Indian women' phenomenon gripped the larger towns and cities of the country. New 'Gender lenses' were thriving in these spaces. Contrastively, the idea of 'issues of women' was awaiting to germinate in the rural as yet. The 'plight of the women' was same everywhere but the 'emancipation' had confined spread. The opportunities elsewhere in the country still remained akin to the patriarchal and prejudiced societal norms. The female literacy rate stood at only thirty-nine percent- explicitly revealing the limited scope of this global 'awakening'.

The conditions in this desert were more complicated. The female literacy rate in Rajasthan was twenty percent, while in the rural areas, it further dipped to a low of eleven percent. The status of primary education in Rajasthan had serious gaps. High drop out rates, poor training of teachers, inadequate curriculum development, infrastructural inadequacies and systemic discrepancies, along with confined social setup and traditional practices, would lead to an environment in villages that was a poor motivation for education.

To work on a reform-lead long lasting change, targeted, well-designed and qualitatively implemented programmes were needed. In Rajasthan, many factions came together with their experiences, ideas, and innovations to model specific interventions for putting gender in contexts- in services, governance, and in the policy. Innovative programmes, like *Shiksha Karmi*, Non For-







mal Education (NFE), Lok Jumbish and District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) came into existence. Among these, a unique initiation was made in the form of Balika Shivar, bringing focus on the accessibility and availability of education.

Balika Shivar, 'a bridge programme to formal education, using innovations in learning' was conceptualized as six-month residential camp. This was a hybrid approach to prepare young women for new perspectives and new possibilities. In its core- redefining the opportunity of education to girls was the first step towards achieving long-term goal to appropriate gender balance in the society.

## Balika Shivar

Following a series of dialogues at multiple levels and drawing learning from similar initiatives like MV Foundation in Andhra Pradesh, a blueprint for Balika Shikshan Shivar or Girls' Education Camp was conceptualized. The core idea was to apply education to equip girls with knowledge and confidence. To enable them to see, identify and ascertain choices, opportunities and chances life offers.

The Shivar (the popular name for Girls' Education Camp) were developed as six-month, all-paid-for, fully residential education camps for girls aged between 10-17 years. The participants were to be those deprived of any education or dropped-out of school because of familial, social, financial



or systemic issues. Primary but not the exclusive beneficiaries were those who constituted the poorest, weakest and most marginalized sections in the society.

The idea for Balika Shivar was to prepare girls to be comprehensively resilient and adaptive in their own ways, to respond to various stimuli. Beyond classroom learning, they were to arm the girls with capacity to tackle the challenges in nutrition, maternal care, child care and sanitation- on health fronts; in language, cognition, and expressions- on their learning front; and on the social front- to create, foster and sustain livelihood prospects towards financial independence. The camps established wider contexts to challenge gaps in education, administration and society. Towards long-term reforms, the camps aimed at demystifying issues in gender and adolescence including child marriage, lack of opportunities, violence against women, reproductive health and constructs of biases based on gender, caste and class.







## Approach at Balika Shivar:

The Balika Shivar had two goals embedded in direct response to local issues- to facilitate girls' optimal growth- physical and intellectual- by making them the primary focus in a system, and to enable their entry in mainstream education by providing with the literacy opportunity. The Shivar developed some unique approaches that were critical in the wholeness of the programme. Its long-term goal was to make girls aware of their rights and opportunities, to fill them with self-confidence & personal strength and to foster critical awareness of the self and the communities.

### *Accessibility*

Prejudices against girls' education stood as biggest barriers. People were not ready to send their daughters to school and the

prime concern was their safety. This had to be overcome for the parents to be convinced. To deal with this, the Shivirs were organized at a nodal location of 15-20 villages. This way the girls and their families, from within-the-range villages, could be persuaded to attend these fully residential camps. Unlike schools, the girls did not need to travel long distances 'alone' every-day. In result, it was possible to convince the families and communities to send their young daughters away for six months- something almost impossible in this part of the world. In each Shivar, approximately a hundred girls lived with their teachers for 6-8 months in a well-resourced, healthy and conducive learning environment. This brought together girls on one platform to facilitate peer learning. The residential format of the Shivar provided girls their space and freedom from household work, giving them time to study and focus on learning. Girls, this way, studied in an infrastructure and system rich with quality and efficiency and an effective access.

### *Pedagogy, Curriculum and Innovation*

The Shivar integrated formal and non-formal teaching methods. It followed the state primary education curriculum. Along with regular curriculum in Science, Numbers, Logics and Language- the program incorporated health, social justice, gender empowerment and climate modules.





For cohesive teaching and learning, the girls were divided into sections. At the onset, they were evaluated and categorized in sections, for cohesive teaching and learning, based on their capability. There would be about four–five sections of twenty girls each. To avoid any coercive learning– direct or indirect– the teachers taught each section according to their collective pace and learning capacities. The girls were prepared before the actual process of education started. This ranged from using songs, folk stories, and drawings. Once the girls adapted to their new surroundings and were eager to learn, the teaching moved to more elaborate concepts and in–depth exercise. The segmentations were dynamic and continuous reclassification were tools to help in focused and student driven learning. Girls grasped at their own pace and most importantly without developing any complexes. This instilled a healthy self competition which the girls indulged in, enjoying bettering the self.

### *Life skills*

Incorporating and adapting the government primary school curriculum into practice, was rather a task much achievable. More taxing was to incorporate curriculum to mentor girls with soft skills. Developing their understanding of health, hygiene, sanitation, puberty changes, sexuality, pre and post natal care, childcare and other issues women deal with. These con-



cepts were carefully integrated in an everyday routine of the Shivir. Every evening was dedicated for focus group discussions on a particular theme. The teachers would give background information for establishing the understanding of the issue. Girls were encouraged to put forth views, challenges or experiences they have either faced or had witnessed. Girls discussed– and so confidently– the issue that were considered either insignificant or a taboo.

Bringing them into sphere of discussions helped them shed their inhibitions and gave girls the necessary information and contexts on issues around them. It also gave them the courage to examine themselves as subjects, for instance many girls were child brides but did not know or understood what this meant and what its consequences could be. Most importantly, it helped them build a strong basis to incorporate change in their lives and encourage everyone else to alter their attitudes.





## *Participatory and collective living*

The girls would participate in all aspects of the Shivir – from basic management to documenting, to organizing small events, monitoring systems, developing learning material, cleanliness of the premise etcetera. This way the educational camps inculcated collective living and responsibility.

In sub-groups, each had a set responsibility they carried out in rotation– one group would take charge of the kitchen, the other would see to the cleanliness of the toilets, another would be responsible for rooms or classes, while another would look after the plantations outside. This tuned them to a sense of responsibility and discipline and gradually it developed to become a habit and attitude. Camps were an extension of their homes, and gave them a true sense of ownership while simultaneously disciplining them. Girls were well aware that the camp would come to a close and they would have to return home. To make best use of this time they had, the onus was on themselves. They would learn in their own way while maintaining their best pace.

Initially, because of their prior exposure, the girls were uncomfortable mingling with others of different religions or castes. When they worked together, they overcome the barriers of caste, religion and class. The girls gradually shed their inhibitions and reservations while increasingly communicating and cooperating among themselves. Within few weeks, the girls - in



the numbers usually as high as 100 - would mature friendships lasting- never to differentiate again.

## *All-inclusive learning*

Song, Dance and Yoga were an integral part of daily schedules. Through these, the girls crystallized their learning. The songs like “*Mere sapno ko jaanane ka haq*” (My dreams have a right to know) “*Saaton bhayan ri ek benadli*” (I am a sister amongst seven brothers, yet the least cared for), “*Babul choti si umar mein parnaiyo mati*” (Father don’t get me married at such a tender age), “*Main tum ko vishwaas doon*” (I build trust in you) and more helped the girls recognize the inequalities and biases that existed in the society. It served to establish a very important connect through fun and play.

Activities, like regular exhibitions, discussions with guest speakers, participation in national days celebrations and festivals, gave girls the exposure to interact with a







world wider from theirs. These opportunities opened their understanding for new contexts while re-according their own. Excursions to bigger cities and towns were a planned and integral part of the programme. Through these, the girls would see and understand the variations in lifestyles and contexts. These exposures often lead them to enriching thought patterns and a deeper understanding of society. One of the most essential outcome of this was that girls would overcome their fear of facing 'unseen', 'new' or 'bigger'.

### *Health and Development*

Understanding the health status of women and adolescents in the region, it was necessary to ensure well-rounded growth of the girls. Balika Shivar was also an intervention to bring health into their growth perspective. To monitor this closely, when the girls came to the camps, each of their haemoglobin levels, height and weight were recorded. Mid and end term health evaluations were made to assess the growth



of girls. During the six-month period, proper diet, multivitamins and mineral supplements nourished girls. The landmark achievement, in this way, was to deliver proper care and nourishment to thousands of young girls, in the desert, to help them grow into healthy adults.

As a general practice, women and girls in the villages use cloth bags filled with sand as sanitary napkins. This was the main cause for higher prevalence of Leucorrhoea in women. To inculcate a hygienic practice, the girls were taught to use sanitary napkins. The girls were encouraged to make these using old pieces of cloth at home. This helped them understand, develop and practice complete healthcare which complimented efforts towards their nourishment and wellbeing. Hands-on solutions and practices helped monitor and overcome barriers in addressing health problems on their own. These, they carried back home and permeated bigger change processes. This way, they became the change, the carriers of change and the change-makers

### *Community and parental support*

Balika Shivar was a unique initiative spreading education into families and the village-societies. They shouldered the elaborate task of preparing communities to take ownership and responsibility of their girl's education. Every Sunday, parents would visit their daughters at the campus. During Shivar, with weeks passing, the parents' ea-



## गीत

प्यारे इंसान बता दे बेटी क्या संतान नहीं-2  
आंगन में दो फूल खिले पर बेटी का कोई माम नहीं  
प्यारे इंसान बता दे बेटी क्या संतान नहीं।  
को दूध पिलाते बेटी के लिये छाछ नहीं

ओ प्यारे

को कॉलेज पढ़ाते बेटी का ज्ञान नहीं

ओ प्यारे

लपने में शादी कर दी

gerness and confidence boosted manifold-witnessing the change in their daughters. This directly involved the parents in the lives of their daughters and this laterally reflected in ways they would participate in taking care of the Shivar as the custodians of the institution.

All essentials, like toiletries and bedding were provided by the parents. The camps were full-paid-for programme, but each time parents visited, they would voluntarily contribute for the Shivar - in whatever they could afford - in kind or money. This build the resilience and helped in the operational costs. This was encouraged so people and society realize and acknowledge that investing in girls' education and well-being is equally important. Communities' support and participation also worked as evaluation mechanism to ensure quality in every aspect at Shivar. Each Shivar recorded a pleasantly fast and long lasting change in the ways the families and communities treated their daughters. A bigger societal reform was gradually shaping up this way.

### *Teachers and the right emphasis*

'The student is as good as the teacher'-believed the Shivar. To facilitate extensive learning in limited time, it was essential, that the teachers were sensitive, well-trained and their enthusiasm remained high throughout. While preparing, before each Shivar, the teachers were specially oriented in pedagogy and the innovative teaching



methods. Given the social contexts and the practical details- special trainings were conducted to sensitize them in understanding the nuances of girls' lifestyles, exposures and challenges in the Thar contexts. Their primary responsibility was to build an environment where, subtly, the girls shed their notions of caste and class, understood gender equity, build confidence amongst themselves and prepare for their roles in welfare of their community. The learning followed automatically.

An important task was to continuously evaluate and train teachers during the camps itself. For this, many internal and external processes were embedded in the design. These extensively trained teachers were spontaneous and innovative in their pedagogy. For instance - at one of the Shivirs, a certain set of girls were finding it very difficult to study in confined classrooms. They had lived all their years in the





vastness of the sands. The teacher started taking their classes out in the open. The girls did astonishingly well. The Shivirs, thus, were a laboratory with constant innovations in holistic teaching methods and practices, reflecting immediate results and opportunity for course corrections.

Daily, group meetings, at the end of each day were an important platform and tool to discuss, learn and plan. Dialogues were facilitated amongst the teacher from different camps being conducted simultaneously in the region. Facilitating feedback- the girls regularly participated in these dialogues, in a highly friendly atmosphere. Many external visitors and resource persons, from institutions like NCERT, education departments, NGOs were often visiting the camps to share their knowledge, skills and experiences. All these multidimensional approaches helped teachers evaluate themselves, correct course and plan to be more effective and to be even closer to their prodigy.

### *Assessment, monitoring and evaluation*

Regular monitoring and evaluation were important and unique features of Shivir. A three-parameter mechanism ensured comprehensive assessment for immediate and long-term course corrections. Academic progress, girls' health and most importantly, evaluating teaching excellence, in this way, ensured and enriched the quality. Monitoring girls' growth was a two-stage

process of internal and external evaluation. At the onset, girls were evaluated benchmarking the physical, behavioural and cognitive progress. Mid-term tests were conducted to measure progress and the records were maintained for each girl. At the end of term, a final examination would be conducted to mark the overall progress. An external team of senior teachers from government education department prepared and evaluated the final examination. This ensured absolute neutrality in the examination. The classes, the girls graduated varied and accordingly, they were awarded certification based on which, the girls could formally be enrolled in the next grade in the government schools.

The camps did not create disconnects with the outside world, and were continuously interacting through different verticals like community, observers, volunteers, researchers, teachers etcetera. They were multiplying the change amongst the girls who could not be a part of these camps, the youth in villages, families, local governance and other nodes with which they interacted. This way, the girls were implicitly building a social change in hundreds of villages. It was the newest, innovative and a youthful initiative made possible in decades, in this part of the world.







## A day at Shivir

The hustle bustle begins at dawn. The girls wake up and chitter-chatter, songs and rhyme engulfs the campus. Running around, laughter and cheer fills the morning, as they get ready for the day. Bathing queues are marked with quarrelling and cajoling. Tremendous energy fills the atmosphere. This happens everyday. Each day, filled with more energy and even more enthusiasm.

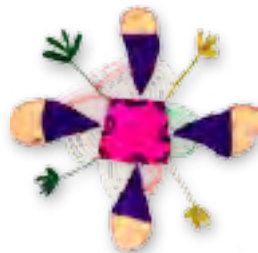
Finishing up, the morning routine, some sit to recap yesterday's classes, practice it loud, in any of those silent corners, while some are at *Kund* (underground water tank) drawing water to wash their clothes. Many are in the dormitories or classes, clearing out the sand from the night's storm. An hour's yoga and exercise is a daily practice irrespective of the season. The energy, in the campus, is at its prime. Breakfast soon follows. The corridor adjoining the kitchen is cleared and the mats are in place. Girls are eager to begin with classes but after eating. It's around 9 in the morning.

The morning assemblies are where girls present their thoughts on particular topic assigned last night in groups. They put forth their ideas and shed their inhibitions

in this process. This way they gain confidence by addressing big gathering. Outside the classes, food is being prepared while sun is heading up westward. The classes break for lunch at 1:30. The girls are nowhere near the exhaustion. An hour later the classes resume. During this, in different classes, the girls are learning science, math, language, environment and about the world around.

Generally, the evenings are to engage in an informal time with organizing games and cultural activities such as songs, dances, plays, skits, discussions on social and youth issues. This is the time when the stories come visiting them. But today, its Sunday! Parents have come to meet- with eager eyes some waited the whole day to meet their girl. So want to know every bit of what is new and different. What their daughter learnt. This day will end with the teachers meeting for their core group discussions and the girls retire for the day after the film screening. This is one of the Sundays of the camp.

*(A memoir by Gopaldan Barhat, caretaker at so many camps in the years gone by.)*







Young Girls Forum

Kishori Prerna Manch

In the six months in the Shivar, girls journeyed and catapulted years, accumulating a bank of knowledge and many wonderful experiences. But, back home, life remained unchanged. The society was neither prepared nor supportive of these beginnings. For the girls, it was a long battle they were setting out on, realizing gradually, that the journey that begins at the Shivar goes a long way in their lives. They needed support and strength to carry forth the change and to infuse it further into their families and communities. This support and strength was to come from the alumni of the Shivar in the region.

Sharing and understanding common references and contexts was becoming a popular and much enjoyed practise amongst the girls from Shivar. These alumni groups were gaining popularity in villages. The fraternity of these popularly known- Shivar Girls- were leading to formations of a robust youth platform for inspiration and change at village level. Considering the change-making potential of these alumni groups, these were formally organized into girls' forums called *Kishori Prerna Manch* (KPM).

*Kishori Prerna Manch* is a platform for, and

by girls, to reflect, discuss and voice opinions and thoughts on the issues they recognize as important. This binds the girls with their Shivar friends and with other girls in village. The KPM meets once a month to discuss ideas, plans, issues and also any difficulty or problems faced by a member or their family. The success of KPMs lies in young minds understanding issues, bringing forth their contexts, and probing indigenous and localized solutions to the problems. They plan for action and work accordingly to achieve the set goals. KPMs are facilitated by the ASHA, Anganwadi Worker, schoolteacher in the village and an NGO team-member.

Girls in hundreds of villages after the Shivirs have worked on issues ranging from health, immunization, mother and child care to child marriage, domestic violence, girls' education, violence in school, gender equal opportunity and caste discriminations etcetera.

KPMs in this way help build a cadre of well-informed, proactive, responsible and sensitive young change makers. They weave newer possibilities with the existing opportunities and challenges to strengthen the existing systems.





The Journey 



1996- 2000

## The first Five Years

The start of the Balika Shivirs was not an easy journey. People and teams who were to engage in implementation of the Shivar had been working with the communities in the remotest parts of the desert, for more than a decade. When the idea was introduced to the teams, it generated a lot of apprehension. They knew the cultural subtexts and dealt with gender biases and social challenges on a daily-basis. They knew, a girl seldom stepped outside home and never really was allowed to interact with strangers. Going out and staying away for six months and that too for something like education was unimaginable. It was difficult to fathom the idea, even for those who were working with the villages.

Nonetheless, with great enthusiasm towards this challenging experiment, the ef-

forts began. The teams, along with their established networks of Community Health Workers, Teachers, and other ambassadors of organizations in the villages, set out for small beginnings to convince many. The initial reactions were disheartening-

*Grown up girls going to schools. Men would be all around them. We cannot let our daughters be a sight for the world to see. Who would look after the cattle, household chores and younger children, if girls were not home? You would take our girls and sell them in Punjab and Delhi. Girls would be 'spoilt' if they step out of home; who would marry them then?*

These and more such scepticisms framed the challenges in bringing the girls to camps initially. Parents could not believe that in a period of six months, their girls could complete primary schooling, having never been to school. The results of an initial social benchmarking survey had revealed that the girls engage in as many as fourteen tasks as their daily fixed responsibility, irrespective of their age, family, community or village. Girls rarely got time for education. They stayed home and their lives revolved around looking after their siblings, helping in household chores, fetching water, firewood and cooking and this, until they were married and sent off to their 'own' homes, where the similar story continued. A fixed notion was that girls did





*We gathered women in my village and discussed with them at length, explained to them the importance of Shivirs but there was no response. They said how could we trust someone with our daughters and what if they do something to our daughters, who would take responsibility? It was very difficult. Our Samaj (society) could have never allowed!*

*Even when I brought my daughter to the Shivir, people in the village would taunt me. They made fun of me. Now when they see, she is doing her graduation in Bikaner; they look at her in awe. It makes me proud. Everyone come to her to have any papers or things like that read. Today, they say, Babri Bai you were right. Our daughters could have been doing well too. Everyone sends their children to the village school now."*

*Babri Bai, a Community Health Worker  
of 2D.O village*

not need to be educated; they were being trained in their household duties and for whatever skills they would require in their lives. Many girls had been married, but as customary, were at their maternal homes until an appropriate time for them to go. This was usually around early to mid adolescence.

Tackling misconceptions, preconceived notions and rumours, the teams had a task of building confidence in the community. To reassure parents about the safety, a woman each, from every village was offered to stay at the Shivar, till she was convinced of the facilities, safety and the environment. It was also provisioned that if not convinced the women could take back their wards anytime. Eventually, the first Shivar started with over hundred girls participating. With all the concerns and reassurances that existed, the achievement in this beginning was that now the parents were evaluating possibilities of educating their daughters. The community was also very closely observing these Shivirs. The women who had stayed at the first few camps now became goodwill ambassadors taking home positive feedback. This grew stronger every time the girls visited home and their parents witnessed rapid changes in them. Their first observations were their improved health- Their behaviour and confidence followed subsequently.

The real ambassadors were the girls from the first few camps, who, when they went back, made their parents proud. The par-

ents and communities saw how the girls insisted on clean water, sanitation, healthy food and basic hygiene. This encouraged those who had refrained from sending their daughters to the camps, in the first instance. The frequencies of camps were increasing with this growing support of families and villages. The intervention successfully broke the myth that the poor and deprived did not want their children to study. It also rejected the hypothesis of various researches that established that 'the marginalized held biases against education'. The doors that were locked for girls for so long were now seeing off the girls to Shivirs, in numbers large.

Close to 3500 girls were already making their presence felt in their homes and villages, in the first five years. They were making spaces for themselves and were eager to share their learning. They were congregating in their villages to form young girls' forum. Kishori Purna Manch was energizing villages with new lens to look at girls and women, differently. This momentum also exposed the gaps in traditional processes of service delivery systems- in health and education. The camps were becoming wider platforms for dialogue about the system discrepancies. Thus, 'an alternative' to the known and practiced was beginning to bridge policy and grassroots, using various discourses, challenges and opportunities.





*Those were difficult times. The society was not open at all. It was not like now. Women could not even speak at home, let alone speak elsewhere. Girls had no choice but to remain invisible. What education! When I had my daughter, I had never even dreamt that she could get an opportunity like this. It was beyond my imagination and sending her to the Shivar was a tough choice. Our own family was against it. It was her father's decision to send her. I sometimes wonder, what motivated him! I see the change in her and she has changed the way I did things. Even things like cleanliness in house, she is so good at it...*

*I think all girls must be educated."*

*Sua Devi*



1996- 2000

## Second Five Years

The initial years of the new millennium were very dynamic and eventful in many areas. Millennium Development Goals were in place and the country had ratified them with high commitments for fundamental improvements in MDG themes by leaps and bounds. Panchayats were getting, and officially so, more powerful and directly responsible for village level governance. Localisation of accountability was finding newer grounds in implementation of projects. Several big welfare schemes were being launched, or were in their final design phases. NREGA, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)*, National Rural Health Mission (NRHM)- all these and many other National and State level projects were setting higher tones for action at village levels.

The results of prior efforts were also becoming more visible. Roads, electricity and other services were finding ways into villages. Between droughts and failed crops, people were beginning to explore newer

possibilities to either enhance their income, or explore new prospects of livelihoods. In all this euphoria, education and the information were emerging as key game-changers. ‘The power of word will be the key in days to come and youth were going to be the change-driver’, was a message, clearly percolating down the veins of society.

Synchronously, Balika Shivirs were dispensing many positive outcomes. On an average 70-85% of girls participating in each Shivar were completing grade 4 or 5 in the course of six months, and the majority of them were immediately finding enrollment in upper primary or middle schools. They were exploring more education, in an environment that was becoming conducive to girls’ education, like never before.

Communities were opening up to let girls attend schools. In multiplier effect of the Shivirs, even those who had not been to the Shivar were increasingly sent to schools. Families and communities had seen the possibilities and were encouraged. The initial thrust being provided by the Shivar, followed by *Kishori Prerna Manch*s and many other government or non-government initiatives opened the locked-down gates. People were coming out in open, accepting that they wanted their girls’ to be educated. These families- who were largely marginalized in the village system, now had seen all- the impact, the reason and the opportunity. The Balika Shivirs were breaking a big barrier in the efforts towards universal education.







*I was filled with so much joy, the  
day, I received a letter from my  
daughter.*

*I can never put it in words.  
It brought tears to my eyes.  
It was overwhelming to imagine  
her write, something I can't do...  
I still keep that letter.*

*A mother's recollections of her  
daughter in Shivar*

Schools were no longer 'boys only' spaces. They were gaining centre stage for the girls. As practiced, girls sat either in corridors adjoining classrooms or right at the back in class. It was almost impossible for them to hear and concentrate on what was being taught. These dynamics began to change- The girls, who had been to the Shivir, began sitting in the classrooms at par with boys. This was perhaps the finest example, of they claiming their equal spaces. The confidence boost in 'the other sex', in villages, was beginning to calibrate the power dynamics.

Traditionally, the schools were hardly the place, the girls in the villages, would go to. So the infrastructure necessities rarely had any consideration in the school administration. But with the numbers of girls' enrolment quickly rising, these and more of such requisites were being realized, bringing the facilities in the school under scanners. Separate toilets, which until now were not a perceived requirement, were of immediate necessity. On the other front, camps were being conducted continuously. With the incremental frequency and their adaptive quality, these further established the contrasting realities between the mainstream schools and the Shivir way of learning for girls.

Balika Shivirs were looping in necessary and fundamental attitude changes in the society. The impact was so inspiring that the community began asking to organize Shivirs offering middle and higher second-



ary education. Many villages in the region had only primary schools and girls as well as boys were left with no options or opportunities to pursue education further. Most children dropped out as they would have to travel a minimum distance of 7-10 kilometres, to reach their nearest school. In a big shift and perhaps to everyone's surprise, in this context, the communities also started asking for Shivirs to be conducted for boys as well.

Girls left the Shivir with a heightened awareness on issues related to health and nutrition. They became particular about their personal hygiene and insisted on the issues such as gender equality, maternal health and care, vaccination, hygiene sanitation. Their self-confidence was high. They had overcome reservations and discriminations the society held towards girls, understood that these were meaningless and were determined to change it for other girls around them. They were visibly more assertive in social situations, in not only finding more meanings to their achievements in educa-





*Motaram ji, is a retired headmaster of Government School in Lunkaransar. He assessed the girls for six consecutive years. Of his experiences, he narrates, "Initially, we were apprehensive of the quality of education imparted to the girls at the Shivoir. We did not believe that those girls who had never been to school could learn anything in six months. We wondered, 'what we struggle to do in five years; these Shivirs wanted to do it in six months. This was impossible we smirked.*

*But when I evaluated the results, I was astonished to see the miracle unfold before me. The girls knew their subjects well and 70% of them passed class five. If I had not evaluated them, I would have never believed it. I know the social context too well and the attitude towards education in this region. Seeing the results, I personally pledged my support to the efforts and thereafter continued my association evaluating and helping in creation of the curriculum and learning materials in the Shivirs."*



tion but were, also getting more spaces and grounds to build their futures on. Contrasting pictures were also emerging from the homes which had girls from the Shivar and which didn't. The health and hygiene in families of Shivar girls were showing stark improvements. Families became more aware about diseases and medical facilities. They were discarding their superstitions around health and were growing less apprehensive of seeking immediate medical assistance. Lactating mother care and early childhood development were two clear areas, which were witnessing a radical improvement. Adopting small changes in their routines and hygiene streamlined this.

The girls progressively advocated good nutrition and health for pregnant and lactating mothers. They facilitated information on vaccination and immunization and helped the community health workers with this. Amongst their adolescent peers, they talked about puberty and dealing with the

changes. They insisted on range of issues, from taking iron supplements to planning smaller families, and to promoting their families towards health and prosperity. The growing numbers of Shivar alumnus, and its multiplier effects on families already was a force majeure. The small alterations they were bringing in the lifestyles were showing results. They were setting in a focus shift on women and their critical concerns. They were supporting the Community Health Workers and Anganwadi Workers in villages to advocate and deliver for health, safe motherhood and childcare. This way they were equally gaining trust and respect in their homes and villages.

A common trait in the society until now was that women's health was least on priority. Immediate attention was paid to the health and upkeep of the livestock, but if a woman was dying, it raised little concern. The girls put a halt to this attitude. Their knowledge of commonly prevalent diseases, their prevention, and of health practices, helped them take immediate measures to check and arrest health hazards. The girls began insisting on family planning not only for themselves, but also advocating it amongst their sisters, sisters-in-law and friends. They explained the virtues of small family and its benefits for women and children's health. They insisted on supplementary nutrition for adolescents and pregnant and lactating women. Along with this, they also spread awareness on social welfare schemes.





*I am physically challenged but I don't worry about this anymore. I have my goals set straight ahead of me. I am preparing to be a teacher and simultaneously pursuing my post-graduation. I live in Jaisalmer alone. Who would have taken me to school, had I not been to the Shivoir?*

*Translations, a reminiscing Nirma, student of a Balika Shivoir in Bajju*

All the positive outcomes gradually strengthened the confidence of families. The Shivirs developed trust and togetherness for educating girls in the society. The girls' congregation strengthened their will to study. They motivated each other and persuaded families and communities to allow them education. The changes were not only witnessed by parents rather they were becoming active participants in the process too- initiating a deliberation for the change. They became advocates of change encouraging girls' for Higher Education. People's outlook towards girls and their education started shifting from traditional silos to opening up the spaces. The girls were continuing with their education, and were taking decisions for their future – something inexistent in the cultural subtexts, so far. Girls were looking at options to livelihood and employment, like teaching, tailoring, ASHA, ANM, Anganwadi worker, etcetera. The families allowing daughters and daughters-in-law to step out and work, was a big achievement for the girls and the society, at large. They were strengthening the local systems by- questioning and highlighting the systemic gaps, becoming a strong and value workforce within the village, and interlocking responsibility and accountability into systems.

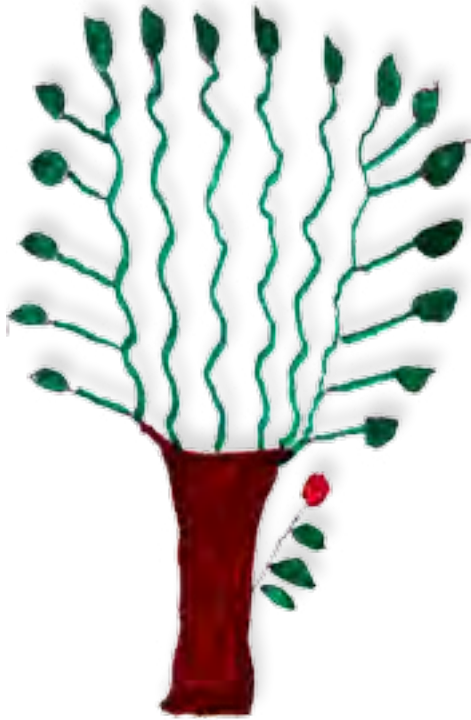
Thousands of girls, through different Shivirs now running in parallel, were coming out in the mainstream. They were exploring different possibilities- in their lives, at homes, in schools, Kishori Prerna Manch's,



colleges, jobs and so on. They were striding towards – what the world calls – the 'bottom of the pyramid' empowerment.

Society's attitude started transforming to such extents that on one hand these resulted in delaying girls' marriage age from traditional 13-15 to seventeen-eighteen or sometimes more; while on the other- to everyone's surprise, the girls' education and Shivar experience started emerging as an important consideration during match-making and marriages. After marking successful and long lasting changes for the generations to follow at their parental homes, the girls were continuing their journeys to their marital homes, with confidence, to further drive a change.





*When the girls came back from the Shivoir, it was amazing to see their sureness. They had so many new things to talk about. They would come and help me bring women for vaccination. The people in the village are superstitious about everything, from birth to death. These girls in their families have changed this. Another change is the age of marriage. Ten years ago girls as young as eight or ten were married off, but today, everyone is sending their daughters to school. Marriage is not the only option in a girl's life, anymore. I have seen ten girls change lives of so many in the village.*

*Anganwadi worker in Mandaal village, narrating her observations of the girls from Shivoir and village*



2005- 2010

## Last five years: Final Phase

In all positivity, girls were carriers of change and change makers. They were crafting delicate blends of their traditional knowledge and new learning. They were not replacing the traditional pools of expertise and experience, but in a reformist-like approach, they were drawing fine balances between their lives and their learning.

They were creating ripples in the society by questioning the practiced approaches of living, and forcing the society to rethink and accord its references and beliefs to the changes in time. In result, the society was growing more receptive of these transformations and was realizing the value of investing in girls, their education and health. Society was emphatically recognizing and appreciating girls' contribution in building of progressive society by claiming effective delivery of services, accessing information







*“The only school close to my village was eight kilometres away. I was not allowed to walk that distance alone. So after the class five, I had to quit studying, even though my parents wanted me to. Then I completed eighth and tenth in the Shivar” narrates Lichma of Nakodesar in Bikaner district. Like Lichma many girls and boys dropped out of school because of the distance they had to travel. Secondary education Balika Shivirs (for classes 6-8 and 9-10) were also conducted over a 6-8 month period on the request of the community.*



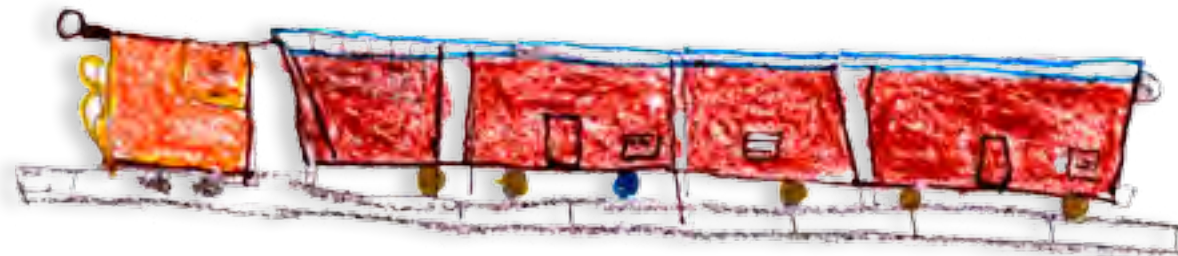
and generating awareness in all spheres—from governance, to health to education, to welfare in the village systems. The idea ‘Women’s leading participation in society is of utmost necessity for balance and its longevity’ was finding comprehension in wider scopes.

The Thar was rapidly adapting to these outcomes while the discourses and currents ‘outside’ were shifting again. Various influences were working concurrently to create a situation of chaotic rapidity in the nation. The second half of the decade was seeing the economy and its dynamics fluctuate. The resources were constricting, while inflation and money influxes were increasing and markets were distributing wealth erratically. The governments were making bigger and costlier efforts in developing effective and extensive policies and programmes. These were infusing more money into the local systems to strengthen their capacities to grow and fortify the

economy. The state was realizing the potential in youth and was aggressively working towards drawing from this high value demographic dividend.

The development discourse was radically shifting towards more centralized-structure approach with infusion of large-scale governmental schemes and policies. It was being believed that systemic gaps could only be bridged systemically! This was indenting the development and NGO sector towards an advocacy and rights-based approach to add value to the implementation of systemic efforts. The drying up of resources for NGOs and the government led mammoth centralized schemes were covertly surmounting a massive challenge for innovative development discourses and actions. Amidst all this, The Balika Shivar was facing a unique challenge. The community dependence on the Shivar for girls’ education was augmenting. Families were refraining from sending their daughters to government schools, preferring Shivar over them. Balika Shivirs were becoming a more ‘profitable proposition’ as the girls in just a matter of six months would ‘learn and complete’ classes 5, 8 or 10, and that too, with better quality of education. ‘If in three years she could complete class X, why is there a need for ten years of schooling’ was becoming a popular notion. The Shivar was not conceptualized to replace or create a parallel system to the mainstream education platforms, rather, innovate an approach which could be used, devel-





*“I did not know how to talk to people, I would hide behind bushes if a car passed by, I used to be so afraid. But, now I can even go to Delhi all alone”, today Manu reaffirms the confidence Shivar built in her.*

oped and replicated in different contexts to bridge gaps for those who missed the initial or founding years of their education. It was to provide thrust to girls' education and to initiate a process of change on progressive pathways using extrinsic efforts.

Consciously, the Shivirs were withdrawn in 2009, with the goals set to manifest learning from these into new initiatives in education. The plan was to monitor and interpret the dynamics over a substantial period, so wide and consolidated experiences could be drawn, shared and infused into large scale projects like *Sarva Shiksha*

*Abhiyan* and Right to Education. In retrospect, Balika Shivar proved that with the support of society and using existing social engines, even a meagre investment in youth could yield very high returns for society. The Balika Shivar became a marvel model in education, with a holistic focus on life-skills, values and a comprehensive learning. It bridged the ill-famous divide between formal and informal system of education, and set a defining precedence in empowering and sensitizing individuals for welfare of the society.



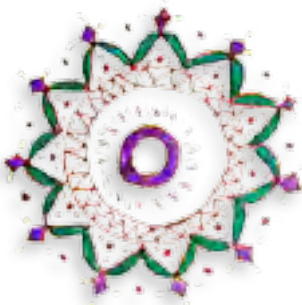


## Part 2

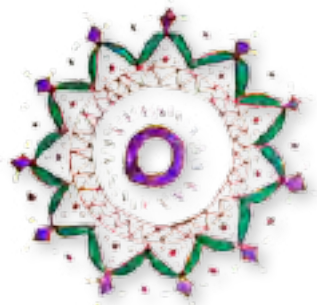


### Ripples of Change: Some Stories

Following are eleven stories of change from the girls of Balika Shivar. Selected from the thousands, to highlight thematic achievements, these stories were captured in a series of interactions with these girls over the period of one year.



Manori



# Reminiscing My Shivir Days

Amazement struck her to see so many girls together in the desert. She had never seen such a multitude of expressions at once. The volume engulfed her. Laughter and song echoed in the vastness of air. "I was scared. In our village, I had never seen so many girls together. There was never such an event. So many thoughts clutched my mind - will anyone talk to me, will they like me, what will I say!" Manori fondly remembers her 'silly' apprehensions from her first day.

Within days, Shivir became home, "It felt like I belonged here. Girls, the teachers, even the campus was so familiar like I had always known them. I began enjoying studying and taking part in activities. Learning was like a game - everyday there was something new to see and discover. We studied during the day and late in the evenings. The rest of the day was spent with friends playing and chatting away." Manori's face brightens with a smile as the scene plays out in her memory.

Nostalgia faints her smile. It has been twelve years since she met her friends. She knows little about their lives and where they are today. She wonders if they think of her the way she thinks of them. And then one memory leads to another and she reminisces her journey since. "I was very young, about ten years old

when I went to the Shivir. We were very poor. Even daily meals were a struggle. My mother had sent me thinking, at least, I would get to eat. I lost my father when I was five. We had no land and no food. In those days we gathered stones and gravel with mother. A cartload earned barely enough to feed all five of us."

At the Shivir, it was a different world, Manori remembers, "I rarely had a bath or cut my nails, or even combed my hair. But at the Shivir, this was compulsory for all of us, and then it became a habit. Our teachers used to tell us, if we did not keep ourselves and our surroundings clean, we would fall sick. I realized later, this was so true that's why everyone kept falling sick back in the village. When I came back, I told my mother and brothers to bathe and keep themselves clean and tidy the house. Slowly it became a habit for them too."

Once when Manori came home on a break from Shivir, everyone was impressed to see her progress. It had been only two months in the Shivir. She remembers, "everyone from my family to friends, were shocked to see the changes in me. I could read, was dressed in clean clothes, my hair was neatly plaited." She elaborates, "the girls were actually envious, they said Manori, now you can read write, we can't do anything but stay home. We will soon be married,







but you will be able to do so many things. I told them that they could go to the next Shivir. Most

of my friends went to Shivir after that. More and more girls wanted to study. The parents were also becoming more supportive seeing the change in me.”

After completing the Shivir, Manori took a training in sewing. This boosted her confidence further. Manori went to school during the day and in evenings she would stitch. She began helping her mother by earning at the age of thirteen. She worked on enhancing her skills- learnt fabric painting, block printing and tie & dye. She wanted to learn to stitch men’s clothes as this would fetch her more money. She was more in control and gradually the situations at her home were improving.

Manori was part of a reading club and village library. These libraries, called *Pothighar*, were set up in villages to motivate the girls to read and gather information. The speciality of these libraries was that they were completely run and managed by the children themselves. They elected a secretary and treasurer amongst them who kept records of the books lent and their rotations. The group also doubled as volunteers for village development activities. They

helped ANM and the ASHA in monitoring health & Hygiene and information dissemination. They also voiced their concerns as children, demanded their rights and acted as support group for each other.

Manori was elected the secretary of her village library and group. As a leader, she was vociferous and an excellent orator-stirring young girls and adults into action. Manori was the one in charge in her village. As the leader, She inspired girls with her boldness and dauntless spirit. She encouraged girls to join school or attend Shivir. If the parents were not supportive, she persuaded them, and if they still did not understand, she got the influential elders in the village to counsel them.

Manori was never scared and was always candid with her words and concerns. She did not shy away from talking and raising any issue despite the conservative and orthodox setting of the village. She elaborates, “Women did not talk about mensuration with their daughters or daughters-in-law, but I would talk to them. Leucorrhoea is a common problem among women and girls. But nobody talks about it. Similarly, many girls experience irregular menses because of anaemia, but would not discuss. It was similar with me before I went to the Shivir. But our teachers talked to us, explained to us, that is when I understood that nothing was wrong with me and this could be treated. It is a different story, that I could not get the treatment until I was married. We could not afford going to city,

getting a diagnosis and a treatment. Nonetheless, I talked to the girls about it, Got the ANM and ASHA in the village to talk to their mothers and grandmothers. I also went campaigning about AIDS- how it was spread and its preventative measures.”

Probing deeper into the source of this strength, she says, “I understood silence could not be a response to any problem. It is important to talk, like we did in the Shivar- So many solutions were possible simply by discussing. That’s how I understood issues like child marriage. These were so common that we did not know there was any other way to life. But I know, now, what it means to be married as a child, why health is important, how to take care of our own health and that of others. This is why I never hesitate to voice my opinion.”

Recounting her days with the *Manch*, Manori says, “It was always easy to organise girls. It was the parents who were the problem. They thought we were spoiling each other and that we discussed things that were inappropriate for girls to talk about. I used to tell them, if we do not talk and discuss we will never know. All of us decided that we would meet at *Pothighar*, we would issue books, read and also discuss. Parents would never know and secretly, we formed campaign.”

Amidst all this, Manori went on to study till class eight. She could not pursue her education further as there were no schools near the village. She stayed home, helped her mother and continued to participate in

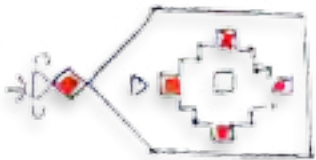
the village welfare. When she was nineteen, in 2009, she got married. Today, Manori has been married for over a year.

Life, she says, has changed and she is enjoying this change. At her marital home, both, Manori and her bank of knowledge are much appreciated. She helps the family by keeping written accounts of business and home expenses. Managing the large farm and family, she receives much adulation. Her husband acknowledges her contribution and praises, “I am lucky to be married to her. She is wonderful.” Manori’s status is not just restricted to the financial aspects of the family. Her sisters-in-law also consults her on any health issues concerning the family. Her opinion is sought on most matters. The young members of her family look up to her. They admire her and often seek her advice. The positive encouragement Manori finds herself bestowed with, is remarkable.

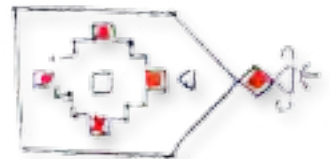
She often vividly narrates her times from the Shivar and the *Prerna Manch*. Her enthusiasm juggles her back and forth in her memories. Her husband watches her emotions shift every now and then and the smear over her brow. He listens to her narratives and revels in her memories. Smiling, laughing and gesturing along.

Manori wishes to complete her education and teach at the village school. She wants to share the knowledge and experiences she has accumulated over the years. Her husband is supportive of her education. He wishes she could attend another Shivar and finish her education.





Manu



# Finding Voice



“I don’t want to have a child for another two years. My husband agrees.” Manu’s effervescence encapsulates the ambience. Manu is sitting in her mother’s kitchen making tea. The smoke from the *chullah* (stove) covers her. Her parents-in-law are not very happy though, she adds. “I am the one who will take care of the child, I can do this only when I am ready. I am only 23 years old and I know there is no hurry,” she asserts. She has been married for a year and a half now— long enough for women to have their first child and carry their second, here.

A decade ago, like many others, her world was limited to the large barren fields and grazing sheep, coming home and helping with the household chores. In her words, “I did not know anything. Not even to think, leave alone talking or presenting myself. I watched my brothers dressing up everyday for school. I always wanted to go too! But, asking my parents was a big no-no.” Today’s Manu knows what she wants, and knows she doesn’t have to ‘not want’ because she is a woman. A rarity in the Desert, where the only space a woman

finds is the walk back from fetching water. Manu expresses her thoughts, her ideas, her plans and her decision. She learnt to adopt change when she was fourteen. She had never been to school or known life any different. But, now she does. She has travelled the country, from towns to cities, from the smallest to the biggest.

“I was surprised to see that girls had the freedom to freely go about in the cities. They could talk so well and they knew English,” she exclaims. Her experiences have helped her understand how different lives are in the village and cities. These differences she observed, she shared with her friends and many more at seminars and workshops she attended as the leader of *Kishori Prerna Manch* (forums for adolescent girls and young women where they could discuss their issues). Narrating incidences, she elaborates, “Once I was at a workshop on women’s health— I was describing the issues of child marriage in Rajasthan, elaborating on the risk child marriage and consecutive pregnancy put on young 12-16 year old girls. We all seemed alike, girls from the cit-





ies and from villages, nonetheless girls. But it was astonishing to realise and acknowledge the stark difficulties in our lives. Here, we were talking about things like marriage, children and there concerns were centred on schools, colleges and careers! But it was startling to see how girls from cities thought all this existed only in olden times. All I could do was ask them to visit my village so they could meet few child brides.”

This realisation motivated Manu to double her efforts and she along with her Shivir-mate cum neighbour vowed to have all girls in their village educated. Today, all the girls in the village have either completed class eight or are in school. Together, they were like activists on a mission. They never tired from making one more effort or trying something new.

Manu worked with the village for years. She says the most difficult task is to break into traditional belief. “Sometimes we had to give up against the adamance of traditions and social milieu. But things have changed a lot since. Today, girls go to school. Girls are no longer forced to mar-

ry before seventeen-eighteen years of age. I got married at twenty-one myself,” she elaborates. “Shivir was the best experience I had. Before I went to the Shivir, I could not talk to anybody, was always afraid and painfully shy. If someone asked my name I would hide. I did not know anything. If I went to buy something, I didn’t even know if I got the right change back. But once I came back, it was different. My parents were encouraging that is why we could go about the village, run a *Pothighar*, conduct meetings as part of *Kishori Prerna Manch*,” narrates Manu fondly. The confidence of her experiences and adventures shows on her face. Nonetheless, even this brave, outspoken and bold girl hesitates, when asked why she did not continue school after eight. She says, “I could not study further. There was only a middle school. My father wanted me to. But he had only one condition that I would study at home and sit for open exams through distance education. With all the work at home, grazing the sheep, where was the time or the energy?” She ends weakly, leaving many questions to be answered.





Basanti



# Inspiring on her way

Euphoria – the word closely describes the excitement that surrounds the campus. The girls, all singing and dancing, are spread across the place. Colours reflect their many emotions. Out of nowhere, a voice is heard commanding the girls to a halt and the chitter-chatter falls to a murmur slowly drawing to silence. Girls huddle up exchanging glances and listening in carefully. Basanti gives them the schedule for until the next day and instructs them to get their belongings together and as she moves away from the group, their chattering regains volume. The girls are excited to go home but the sadness of parting with the friends they've made taints their emotions. It is the sorrow of parting with their friends and their *jijis* (teachers). They may never be seeing each other again. The Shivar has become a home, away from home. Six months spent here are chronicled in their memories forever. Life stands at the threshold, once more.

Basanti has been witnessing this for years now and knows how dear this day is to them. Only three years ago, she was on the other side, holding her friends in embrace. It was her third camp and she had passed her class ten. Each time making new friends

and meeting a few old ones, learning and living together, she hardly realized how in five years and three Shivirs, she managed to graduate class ten. Today, donning the role of a teacher at the Shivar, she understands the girls very well. This swap in roles fills her with immense pleasure and pride. She exclaims, “A decade ago she could not read and write, today I teach how to! Helping others like her to sculpt their futures themselves.”

She recognizes how this responsibility extends itself further on her. Grazing sheep marked her growing years. In the far dunes, She would go with her sisters and at times alone. She was fourteen when she came to Shivar. Life has come a full circle for her since, and in such a pleasant manner. She realizes life's similes, every time she sees the girls, hears their stories and shares their life. Making her reflect on the journey she has been through, it further elaborates the possibilities she now sees for herself.

Basanti's mother has been her biggest strength. She is the reason why Basanti and all of her six sisters found an opportunity to study. This opened their lives to new shores. Her mother, a class eight graduate, is an *Anganwadi* worker. Despite



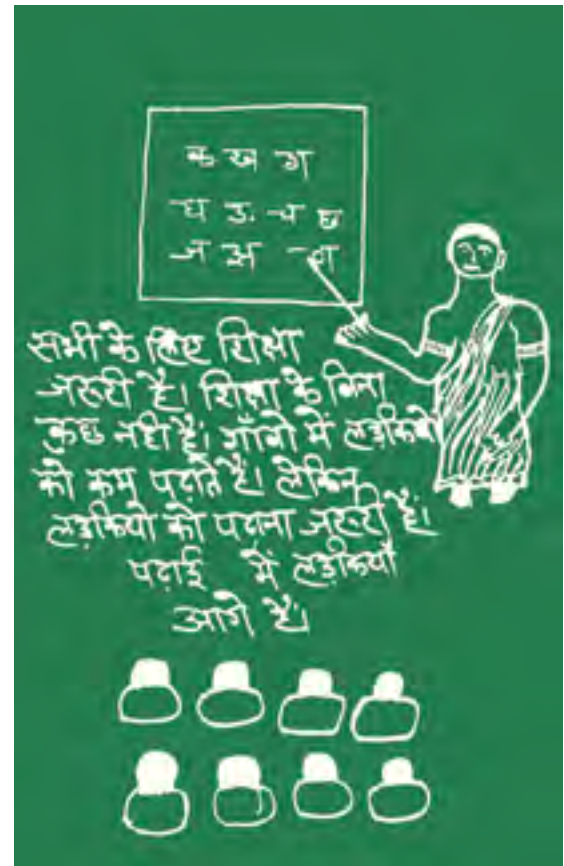


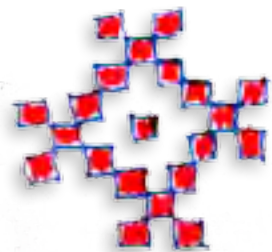


this, she could not send her daughters to school. Her husband and mother-in-law did not agree with girls going to school. They questioned the need of education for girls. They justified using the societal norm authenticating their point of views. They believed it was an unnecessary expenditure, over and above the dowry for six daughters. But Basanti's mother was determined to send the daughters to school. When she heard of Shivir, she persuaded, fought and finally sent them all. Her mother's struggle instilled a strong sense of determination in her daughters. The girls knew the worth of this opportunity. They knew it was the only chance they had and they had to use it to the best. Basanti says, "We wanted to make our mother proud. To prove it to our father that it was not a mistake. We had also realized that our hard work could be the only expression of gratitude for our mother."

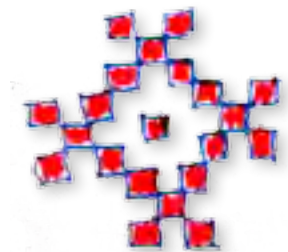
Today a mentor, Basanti often narrates her story to the girls. This, she points out, dilutes barriers- that of a teacher and a student. They quickly become each other's confidant, relating with each other and establishing an immediate connect to last forever. Once they open up, no issue, ranging from health to their families or even marriages remains a taboo. When they go back, this internalized approach, reaches their homes and facilitates women to express and share what they feel. Basanti from her experience verifies how even the simplest of sharing opportunity made a difference in her own family.

Today all her sisters are working, independent and confident. Basanti is studying the first year of her graduation. She teaches at the Shivir to support herself. "What better way could I do this, than sharing my knowledge, experience and learning?" She smiles. She is positive and assertive of her choices. She sees the potential in her. She wants to be a policewoman and is preparing for the entrance. When asked why? Pat she replies, "To protect women!"





Vidya



# Making future a possibility

“Growing up without a father kills the possibilities of a future,” retorts Vidya, “My mother and I had to struggle to get our identity and space even in our family. Our opinions never mattered. We have been dependent on my uncle for support.” Life in her society is led and manoeuvred by the head of the family. But what happens when this head is no more? A life of struggles, difficulties and challenges begins. Vidya’s young mind captured strong impressions of her mother sewing clothes to run their home. She often woke up and her mother would already be at her sewing machine. She was two when her father passed away and her brother was born six months later. The only memory of her father she has is a photograph of her parents. She keeps it safe amongst her possessions.

Early in her life, Vidya realized that fighting the situations was the only way she could live her life. She says, “We were treated differently in the village. Left without a father was not the only reason. We belonged to the lower caste. In school, classmates would not talk to us because we were ‘beneath’ them. They would not drink from the same *diggi* (water tank). For a long time, because of the way we were treated, I thought something was wrong with me and people like me.”

The school in *Mahadevwali*, Vidya’s village, offered only eight classes. The only other Government high school in the area was at a distance of fifteen kilometres from here. Most girls had no choice but to drop out soon after. The year Vidya was in class eight, the District Collector of Bikaner was visiting her school on children’s day. She got together a couple of classmates, wrote a long letter of grievance, stating the problems and gave it to the Collector. Nothing moved for two years disappointingly, she remembers.

Left without an option, she had to drop education after class eight. Her uncle (mother’s brother) arranged for her marriage then. Her mother and she had no choice but to agree, given their social dependence. Vidya wanted to study further. “There was a school in *Chattargarh* (a nearby village), but my family could not afford its fee. However then, I found out about Balika Shivar from a friend who was married and lived in another village. She persuaded my mother to send me there.”

At the Shivar there was no bias based on caste. She states, “I discovered an absolute new perspective to life, where everyone was equal and had a right to equal opportunity. It was so different. We all lived together and ate together. Nobody called





each other names or said nasty things. Initially there were a few who behaved differently but soon they blended in too. When I came back from the Shivar, I just did not return with a class ten certificate, I returned with a changed attitude. I was determined to make amends to my life and to others around me. I wanted to work harder for my mother and to live with equality.” Elaborating on the difference in her, she reinstates, “I joined as a Mate with a MNREGA project, the summer I returned from Shivar. We were assigned the work of reconstructing the water tanks in the village. This was my first opportunity. I got together a few concerned and informed elders of the village and voiced for one common water tank, unlike then existing setup of two tanks based on caste. This started a commotion in the village. We managed to fight our battle right and finally got a common tank constructed. But sadly a year later, local elections in the village restored the same system of two separate tanks. All our efforts went in vain.”

Vidya wanted to continue with her education and return to the Shivar the following year to complete class twelve. She wanted to study college in Bikaner, but was disappointed again. Her mother had to give in to her brother’s pressure, although she wanted Vidya to pursue higher studies. Vidya’s uncle thought this to be ‘ill mannered’. She was sixteen then and girls her age were married and had children! He said he would not be responsible for finding her

a suitable match later and that it was time for her to be married too. After much fight, Vidya got permission to take her class twelve exams through distance education. She was extremely disheartened and bitter with all this and doubted she could prepare enough to pass. She had no books, nor any money to buy them. She had even decided against studying further if she failed. Nonetheless, she worked hard, borrowed books and used guidance from wherever she possibly could. Vidya passed her exams with a total score of sixty-five percent. She was elated. The whole incidence, she says, “Gave me the confidence that I can achieve all I want in life. No barriers are ever big enough to stop one, if one has the will to do. There was no looking back. I made up my mind to go to college.” This decision brought the same argument of marriage. She succeeded this time. She would marry only after she completes her graduation and until then she would not be forced to marry.

Today, Vidya has completed a Diploma course in computers and is in her second year of graduation. She lives in a girl’s hostel in Bikaner all by herself. She has many dreams for herself. To start, she wants to graduate and prepare for a government job.





Sweety



# “Freedom is dear to me”

Sweety is a teacher, a seamstress, a student and a homemaker- and all this simultaneously. Her many different roles are only facets she adorns. She hops in and out of these constantly and rather smoothly. The teacher in her shares learning, the seamstress is a hard worker, the student is meticulous and the homemaker is all and finicky. She is all this at only twenty- She asserts

Sweety has been married for a year and is very happy. This new addition has given her a chance to look at her life differently. She had never imagined, taking care of the family, home and the farm could be pleasurable. She was a pampered child at home and unlike most other families, Sweety's parents thought of education as a necessity. School was a must for all siblings. Till class five she went to the village school, but much to her relief and her parents' disappointment, she had to dropout. The village school was only till primary level.

After about three years of her dropping out of school, her parents found out about the Shivar. She was immediately sent there. It was seen as the best opportunity - all paid and most importantly just in six months she could complete class eight recovering her loss of three years. “I did not like it in the Shivar. I missed home. I forced my parents to take me back and succeeded. But the fol-

lowing year, they sent me again. This time I had no option. Gradually, I began liking it. That's where I actually began enjoying studying. From painting to dancing, from playing to studying and from dramas to speeches in the morning assemblies, everything was exciting. Unlike school, we were given more attention. If we did not understand something we could always ask our teachers. They were very good and took good care of us. They always told us education was the only way we could change our lives and situations. I wanted to be like my teachers,” Sweety confesses. She completed her class twelve through open examinations. She had begun supporting herself through sewing. Another opportunity that came her way was when she was asked to conduct a three-month training in sewing for girls. She jumped at the opportunity and thoroughly enjoyed it. “I received the same adulation I had felt for my teachers. It was overwhelming. Whenever I would go back from the village, the girls would come running to me in gratitude. It is inexplicable. After that I have been regularly conducting camps, both sewing and education.”

Today, when Sweety, witnesses this support, it fuels her determination and she strives harder. To validate the freedom and support received, she ensures she does not







let anybody down at home. This is why she puts in an extra effort to meet all the needs at home. She juggles between sewing, teaching and studying tirelessly. Ask her how she finds time to study, stitch, work at the farm and take care of home, all in twenty-four hours, she puts it simply, “ You never get time. You make time”.

She was only in the first year of graduation and had no desire to marry soon. She says she was not prepared to take on a full-fledged responsibility of a family; also, she was scared that this would end education, teaching and her freedom. In contrary, marriage came to her as a pleasant surprise. She found herself in a family that bestows her with love, affection and freedom- all her apprehensions have disappeared. Her father-in-law is supportive and encourages her to study hard. He wants to build a school in their village so the children would not have to commute ten kilometres each day.

He wants Sweety to support this with her knowledge and experience and teach there. Her husband reinforces her with new energy every time pressure mounts on her. She says, her husband understands the value of education and a career. He was in class five when his mother passed away. He had to quit school to help at farm and take care of his younger brothers. Since then all he has done is to work relentlessly.

She continues to teach at sewing camps while also studying and sewing for neighbourhood. She wants to get a job that will stabilize their income. She says agriculture fluctuates too much – one year it’s good and in next two you are on the mercy of rain. There is no security. She never shies from walking that extra mile. “I labour, I earn. I do not have to burden anyone for my needs and this gives me the strength to put forth my point and the freedom to do what I want. This is dear to me.”





Pankaj



# Pankaj's determinations, small & BIG

Pankaj lives in a small house in the town of Nokha- one room and a big *verandah*. Her mother and seven siblings share the room with her. They take turns to look after the field in their hamlet fifteen kilometres away. Life is at a threshold for her today. Everyone is elated. Pankaj is soon going to be a police officer. She has cleared the Rajasthan Police Constable Recruitment Exam and now for a six-month training, she is to go to Jodhpur. It is an accomplishment for her and her family. All this seems like a dream. Coming from a patriarchal community system, Pankaj has made a long journey. Her family has been the biggest support and she credits them for motivating strength in her. They have worked equally hard to help her get through. To help her prepare for the preliminary tests, her brothers would wake up with her before dawn for her physical training. Her sister and mother took all the household chores on to themselves and left Pankaj to study. She says it is the entire family's support that has helped her achieve this.

Customary to her community, girls weren't and are still rarely schooled, they help their mothers in kitchen, look after the younger siblings and in all time that remains, they help in the farms. Her brothers, however, did go to school. This story is ubiquitous to most other families in her neighbourhood. Rules, commands and an extremely protective environment defined growing up for her. Girls in the family held little say and did exactly as they were told. They never went out and never spoke to strangers forget aloud.

It got tougher when her father passed away, two years ago. The family is still trying to recuperate. Her mother is illiterate and their only source of income- their farm, was at the mercy of rains. It was a very bad season. It got tough even to gather meals enough for the family. Her brothers, older and younger, were all studying then. Her eldest brother had to quit regular school and pursue his studies privately. He helped his mother at the farm and tried his luck in odd jobs at the town.





The life of Pankaj and her four other sisters changed after the Shivar. There was no other school close by, so her older sister and two cousins were sent to Shivar first. Subsequently, realizing the potential for the girls, their uncle sent Pankaj and some other girls from their village to the Shivar till class five. On their return, the family noticed a holistic transformation in them. The family realized that the girls were not only 'class five pass', but had picked some very important life skills as well. Later, on their insistence, all of them were sent back to the Shivirs for class eight and ten.

Her uncle points out, "Sending the girls to Shivar was an enormous decision for us then. It was very difficult to believe that girls needed to be educated. We did not want them to earn. It was rather a matter of shame if anyone thought so. But now times have changed. We are happy about Pankaj's job. We are proud of her. This change is because of the girls. We trust them and their decisions completely."

Today, at nineteen, Pankaj has accomplished feat. She is an inspiration to her siblings and friends. "My Family is my priority. We have seen too many hardships. Now this news brings us some hope. I want to do well. I have to- for my family. There is no chance to hesitate now. I will make it through", she speaks confidently. "This strength," she says "was not always in me. There was a time when I was afraid to talk to strangers and hid in corners to avoid facing new people. I was so hesitant. I'd never even imagined being in the police force." Pankaj is not afraid anymore. She is striving to make the best of her life and is geared up for challenges ahead. Her belief defines not only her strength but also the opportunities she has grabbed. Pankaj has her goals, plans and plane spread in front. Her training will immediately place her as a police constable. She does not know where she will be posted. All she is sure of is that she has always liked walking new paths and that she is ready for this one as well.





Salema



# Salema's Silence

It is a warm morning. The sky is bright and the sun deepens the golden colour of sand. Salema stands at the kund filling water in a large basin. The cattle quietly drink from it and the sound of the empty bucket hitting the water again fills the air. The cattle moves in dunes feeding themselves—sumptuously for once— on the good *jowar* that has cropped this year. The day for Salema begins with her cattle, continues with their grazing and ends with milking them in the evening. Occasionally the cattle are swapped with goatherd. She claims the time she spends grazing them as her 'own'. Uninterrupted here, she weaves her stories and embellishes them with her rhymes, she says and these stories knit the differences she witnesses closely.

This year-round routine alters only for some days of MNREGA projects, where she works as a Mate (facilitator). The dream-weaver, then, transforms into a firm taskmaster. There, she meticulously follows up on the execution and ensures that the work meets the standards specified. In her two appointed terms, she has supervised the work of ground levelling for road construction and water tank construction. Her scrupulous work has won her an exception

in the MNREGA. Though under-qualified for the job but she's is the only mate her village, Badiya, can have. She is the only one who has completed secondary school.

Salema's education started at *Marushalas* in her village in the mid 1990's. *Marushalas* were Urmul run primary schools in the remote areas of the Desert. All the village children attended school with her then. As Salema and many of her friends and neighbours graduated class five, the *Marushalas* were withdrawn. She points out sadly, *Badiya* has never had another school. Her batch was the last ones in *Marushala*. Only two boys continued with secondary education, walking a distance of eight-kilometres daily to the nearest school. But within two years, the distance discouraged and even they quit. She elaborates, "If I had not gone to Shivir, I would have ended up like everyone else. There, we lived together. We looked after the campus, trees, and its cleanliness. We were always involved in learning new things. We understood the fields, the climate. My routine life was more informed. But when I came back I realized how different my world in the village really was." She sees the problems in her village but fails at making people realize how their







complacency is affecting the future of children of the village.

The sad part, she tells, is this situation hardly causes any concern in the village. When she raises the issue, the unresponsiveness she's left with, disappoints her. Some parents' willingness encourages her to tutor children at home. But parents' inclination for having school is inexistent and it's now weakening her efforts. She is saddened by the state of education and governance. She had filed a petition to be appointed as the para-teacher in village, but this was rejected. She retorts, "What good is a Right to Education, if the village cannot even have a para-teacher. More than forty children of village have no school to go to. Young girls are being married and we have no one who'd listen."

The only support she finds is her father, Jamal Khan. He understands the necessities and voids of the village. Together, the fa-

ther-daughter duo, make efforts at making the bare amenities available in the village. They face many problems because the village is not a revenue village and is an ethnic minority. The panchayat is based seven kilometres away at another village. This slackens the process of any facility reaching the village. The governance neither takes any responsibility nor shows any concern. It takes many repeated petitions to mobilize smallest of operations, highlighting the sorry state of affairs Salema points out, "A water tank was constructed last year. But the quality so poor that after only six months, the floor of the tank eroded and broke; since then, there has been no repair." She retorts, "Now where do we get water from?"

Describing the indifference inescapable at all levels, she details further on the systemic loopholes. There is no electricity or water. The only tar road ends eight-kilo-

metres away from her village. She finds it challenging to work with both, people as well as with such an indifferent governance systems. She is alone in this fight. People fail to understand her concerns for the village. They live by their age-old practices. Living by little means available, people are unaware of the changes in the world outside. “And how many of outside world do really know us”.

In a society, deep-rooted in its staunch conservative customs, sending Salema to the Shivar was a big decision for her father. He details how it meant dishonouring tradition and defying the society, tacitly. Nonetheless, he knew the significance of his decision for his daughter. However, now the societal pressure builds on him. His confidence is thinning. He refuses to send Salema to another Shivar to complete class twelve. He says he does not want to discourage her from studying, but insists she studies at home now. People’s attitude toward them has disoriented him. Their efforts for the village are received with scorns. His daughters, in their early twenties, are the oldest and the only unmarried girls in the village. People belittle his decision and accuse him of corrupting young minds and encouraging defiance.

Salema is to be married soon. Her younger sister and brother will be married to siblings of her fiancé, at the same time. Her fiancé is her first cousin. She questions the future of children of this consanguineous marriage. Ignorance and silence is the only



response she gets. She fails to explain the link between her youngest brother’s Down Syndrome and her parents’ consanguineous marriage. Her parents remain adamant about the marriage. Salema’s mother has witnessed the change intently yet she refuses to acknowledge. She reasons the necessity of girls’ roles – or the lack of it – in her community. Though not against her education, the mother never let Salema go anywhere far. Her questioning is seen as a rebellion, instead of being a point of discussion. She says Salema will eventually be doing everything that I have done. What good is this change then? As she talks about society and need of girls’ education, her cellphone rings. Nonchalantly, she answers it and listens to an advert playing from the other side– visual irony crafts a background– and then she continues with her discourse. Apparent questions answered while the rest struggle to surface!





Maghi



# “Out of bounds”

Right through her growing-up years to becoming a mother, to choosing a career, Maghi has felt the predominance of the words- ‘Out of bounds’. Everything she has ever wanted to do or has done has had an encounter with this at first. Now, Maghi believes these words spell magic and she finds her way out of all situations. The first time she heard this was when she was insisting to go along with her older sister to attend a Balika Shivir. She was nine then and because the admissible age was twelve, the Shivir became ‘out of bounds’. Her persistence forced an exception and she was admitted in the Shivir. This exception became a standard at the Shivir – girls who wanted to study but had no school access came to the Shivirs.

At the Shivir, besides being a brilliant student, Maghi was also an active participant in all other co-curricular activities. She learnt photography, developed a liking for drawing and enjoyed sports. She believes Shivir carved strength in her. Her interactions with teachers and peers added to perspectives. She realized that everyone had problems they were dealing with. She says she became sensitive to this very early and adds, “The Shivir has been like a preparatory school for my life thereafter. If I had not been to the Shivir I would not have been

able to cope with all that followed.”

Maghi was six when she was married but lived oblivious to this fact for very many years. When she was thirteen, her mother-in-law passed away. Her husband, a man ten years older, came to fetch her. She had responsibilities to shoulder! All of sudden, little Maghi was the ‘woman of the house’. At that time Maghi was due to take her class ten ‘board’ exams and with this turn of fate, her education further became ‘out of bounds’. In compensation, She was promised that she could take the exams the following year. A year passed but everything changed in her life so fast that she comprehended little of all that amassed her– taking care of the family, the house and helping out in the farm. She found it difficult to cope with. She was meted out with more responsibilities and taunts became an accompaniment. Not realising the reality, her hope to take the exam lived on and she rather innocently requested her father to file in her form. She jolted out of this fantasy when she realized this was ‘Out Of Bounds’. Her in-laws rejected her idea of continuing her education. This shock stressed Maghi so much that she fell ill and was sent away to her parents’ home. This came as an opportunity in disguise. Maghi grabbed it and while recovering from her acute health, she





secretly took her exam. Much to her own surprise she passed it with distinction.

Maghi returned to her in-laws' and this time with new plans.

Now, she wanted to complete her schooling. However, there were different plans ordained for her. Soon she realized she was pregnant. Maghi was scared. She was only fifteen and had no one to help her through. She says, "I did not even know how one becomes pregnant! My mother then explained to me and I realised what had happened". Reminiscing the days, she is filled with remorse, "I was so naïve that I thought I was going to die. I was actually in a state of denial for a long time. I did not want a child so I refused to believe that I was pregnant. I did not take any care about my health or nutrition. After my son was born, I did not know how to take care of him. My mother mothered him." She confides with tears rolling down silently. Her struggle within herself and with the world outside made lucid in silence of the passing moments.

Even with all this, Maghi never thought of giving up. She says, she remembered different experiences of other girls from the Shivir. This gave her strength to carry

on. Struggling with her new identity as a mother, she juggled home, the baby and her work in the fields. When her son was over a year, Maghi took up a short-term teaching job in the village. She taught adults to read and write and trained them enough to be able to sign their names. Her family at first refused to permit her to take this job up. After much coaxing, they let her go but on the condition that her husband would escort her back and forth. Once was done with this, she found herself a job at the *Sarva Shiksha Kendra*. This time she had to plead her case less with the family. Her job fused in her a new confidence and revived her desire to continue with education. Yet again the task before her was to convince the family. The three years had changed things in her favour. Her husband's daily escorting gave them more time together. He began to understand the importance of education. Earlier, he thought studying was a waste of time but gradually, through his interactions with Maghi's colleagues at the *Kendra*, his outlook changed considerably. Seeing her earn also softened him toward her. Maghi gathered courage and discussed her desire to take class twelve exams. This time she did not have to struggle. Maghi prepared well and passed her exams again with a distinction.

This gentle shift in attitudes gave Maghi a newfound courage. She wanted to do more with her learning and make it useful for not just herself but others as well. Her younger brother, who was pursuing a course in nurs-

ing, brought her a new chance. She wanted to take a chance. Again, she secretly filled her form and took the entrance test. When she passed the test, she went to her husband and told him about it. This time the 'out of bounds' was weaker. His silence backed her against the refusal she received at home. They together managed to arrange the enrollment fee as well.

Today, Maghi is a student of General Nurse Midwifery (GNM), at a reputed private hospital in the city of Bikaner. At the institute, everyone appreciates her. Her colleagues and teachers know that unlike the rest, she has not been to a regular school neither is she a science student. Maghi takes extra classes for English, as it is the medium of instruction here. Her friends help her with it. The pressure on her is enormous to cope. Initially, she felt like quitting but a recap of the life gone by strengthened her. Now she tries harder every time she is disheartened.

Maghi lives alone in Bikaner, pursuing something totally unexpected of her. Her journey saw "out of bounds" at every step. Today, things are gradually smoothening.

Her relation with her in-laws has become more pleasant. Her husband understands and this to her is the biggest encouragement. She strives to give her son a platform where he can decide what he wants. She wants to ensure nothing is "out of bounds" for him. Maghi exuberates courage, conviction and a dauntless spirit. She has endured a difficult life, lost her childhood and grown to be an independent and a strong woman. She is a role model for her entire family, and courage to fight the unreasonable traditions.

Maghi's father is a changed man. He no longer bows to preposterous traditions and customs. He has realized the consequences of the choice he made for Maghi. He has sworn against forcing anything onto his children. Instead, he advocates education and equal opportunities for girls now. Maghi's struggles were not hers alone. Her father, borne with guilt, suffered with her. One Maghi continues to struggle and make a life, strengthening all those around her with her determination. She stands firm as the rock.





Asmaan



# Asmaan's miracle story

The village knows Asmaan as the 'walking miracle'. She is admired and is an inspiration to many. Very few women survive a premature delivery, and fewer manage to save their babies, in this part of the world. Premature births and death are synonymous and a few who survive become heroes and are believed blessed. Asmaan understands the exaggeration in the village's appellation. She is overwhelmed by people's response. For her, she is just another twenty-year old woman who is a mother of a ten-month baby, a wife to her husband and a daughter-in-law to her in-laws living in the village of *Girirajsar*.

Asmaan is pursuing first year of her bachelor's degree in arts and this to her is an achievement. Taking care of the baby along with studying is not easy but she manages just fine. She remembers her parents sent her to the Balika Shivar when she was eleven. Initially, being away from home made her sad but as she made friends, she started enjoying it there. Gradually, as her interest grew in learning, playing and the *Chetna Satras*, she forgot all about home. At the end, she did not want to leave her friends, her teachers or the campus; she laughs remembering the turn of events. She came back home and continued to school in her maternal village, *Chimana*. She got

involved with the *Kishori Prerna Manch* and would attend meetings, help the ASHA and the ANM in the village and share with her friends, peers and older women- everything she had learnt about health, hygiene and sanitation. Life continued with excursions to various cities, meeting people and dialogues on 'life as an adolescent girl in the Desert'. Asmaan says "it was my knowledge that helped me through my pregnancy. I knew I had to be cautious, so I took care of my health, ate well, took my vaccination and went for regular check ups. Except for the last vaccination, I took all. My baby was eager to see the world outside!" With a smile she adds, "I was also studying to take my class twelve exams then. I had to make sure I passed. I took my exams after a month of my delivery. I would leave my baby at home, travel to *Chimana* everyday to take my exams." Despite her pregnancy, premature delivery and being a first-time mother, Asmaan managed a score of sixty percent in her class twelve.

She points, "I would have not known anything if I had not been to the Shivar, and I would not have been to the Shivar if my parents would not have sent me and eventually if I had not been to the Shivar, my mother-in-law would have never met me and I would not have been married into







such a supportive family.” Her determination and strength she declares is because of the support she received from her family. “If it wasn’t for my mother-in-law, I would have never been able to continue with my education. My baby and me would not have been looked after. Even after the pregnancy, my mother-in-law made sure both of us got nutritious diet and the baby grows well. It was because of her that I could study, take my exams and take care of the baby. She was the one who immediately called the ANM and took me to the Clinical Health Centre in Kolayat, forty kilometres from here. There my baby and I were saved. I would not have been able to do any of this on my own.”

The women in this house share a special bond. The two daughters-in-law find support in their mother-in-law. Paro Bai is an Anganwadi worker in the village. She has been working for the health and welfare of the village for more than twenty years. She comprehends the change in time and believes it necessary to adapt. Speaking fondly, she narrates, “I am so happy and proud because of Asmaan. Seeing her, four boys who had dropped out, have gone back to school. People said ‘Paro Bai’s daughter-in-law can study, despite a premature delivery, taking care of the baby and of the house, so the boys can surely study.’ It is very important for everyone to study in these times.” Paro Bai is proud of the choice she made in making Asmaan her youngest daughter-in-law. She recounts with a smile, “I

encouraged girls in the village to study at Shivar and even personally took them there. I remember seeing Asmaan as a young girl there. I met her at various meetings in Urmul later on. I took a liking to her. That’s when I decided she would be right for my youngest son. I waited till she turned eighteen and then arranged for their marriage. Today, I am a proud mother-in-law.”

With all the support and adulation, Asmaan knows she will be able to achieve all she wants. Her immediate aim is to graduate and become a teacher. She wants to share her knowledge, her experiences and all she knows, so that more girls like her can take care and control of their decisions, their lives and their futures.





Leela



# Choosing at Crossroads

A little girl sits reading out alphabets as her mother recollects the song that won her prize money of hundred rupees in class 6, years back. Both glance at each other and smile timidly. The mother coaxes the six year old to continue with her reading as she tries to remember the lyrics.

Leela is a mother of four. She has been married for eight years and her oldest daughter is six. She lives in a village called *Mandaal* about seventy kilometres away from the city of Bikaner. She is excited about her daughter starting school. She says it reminds her of her times in school. ‘Lucky they don’t have to fight to go to school’, she softly adds and goes on to talk about how she has made them an ‘expert’ in alphabets, numbers and rhymes. She points at the many scribbles made by them on the walls of her hut and how they decorate it with colours, making the room come alive. “I want to do the best I can for them”, she says.

Besides being a mother, Leela is the ASHA of the village. Looking after the health and welfare of the village is her responsibility. She admits that she enjoys her work thoroughly and also the adulation she gets in the village. She talks elaborately about the different mind-sets she has to work with, “everyone thinks differently – the older people sometimes do not understand the

changing times. They want to hold on to their old traditions. While, the younger ones are eager to listen but lose patience easily. Working around superstitions is the toughest. People do not adopt something new easily. They follow the age-old methods. Only when they see the consequences do they realize. But what’s the point in retrospect? She says. “There has definitely been a positive change in the four years of my working. People are willing to take medical advice now. Even women”, she points out, “are now more open to discussing their health with her and the ANM”. She explains, “It was easy because I knew about health, personal hygiene and the necessary measures and precautions. When I was in the Shivar, I developed this as a routine. Our teachers used to tell us how we should always filter water before drinking, keep the *Mataka* (earthen pot) covered, water should not stagnate in open spaces, clean the surroundings and keep all places hygienic. When I came back from the Shivar, I used to tell my mother and neighbours about this. Now I tell the whole village. Yes, the ASHA trainings helped me but without the knowledge I already had, it would have been very difficult. I would have lacked the confidence in the first place.”

Endorsing Leela’s work, the village’s Anganwadi worker details, “Leela does her job





sincerely. She ensures that there is a proper routine of health and sanitation. People in the village are generally very superstitious about everything, but this does not affect her. In spite of being the daughter-in-law in the village she acts as if she is the daughter of the village. With her help, three children in the village have managed to cope with malnourishment. She handled a very complicated pregnancy case very well with the ANM. If they would not have taken that young bride to the hospital in time, anything could have happened. Her efforts have built people's confidence in her." The Anganwadi worker then expresses her concern over Leela's recent resignation from the post.

Leela reveals her reasons for the resignation; she says despite all her efforts, she hardly ever receives any acknowledgement. She talks of how the officials who come on inspection always sees the faults and finds it short of their expectations. They do not understand the limitations of working with the people in the village because they come from cities. The worse among them are so corrupt that they just want to get money." All this weakens her determination. Frustrated she recently resigned of her job. "Be-

cause of these kind of situations, I decided to quit. I'd rather focus my time on my children"

Leela has her priorities set. She understands her growing children need her time. But she also understands her responsibility for the village. To balance both, she says, she has applied for the job of a *Gram Sevika* (village extension worker). She explains, "As a *Gram Sevika*, I will have more time. I shall link people to various services, especially with banks and financial aid. The rest of the time I could spend with my children." She understands the opportunities she has and is making efforts to explore further. "I would have never known to do anything, if I had not gone to the Shivar. I would have been like my two sisters, illiterate, sitting at home and living a life of invisibility. If it wasn't for the Shivar, how would I have been educated? Who would have appointed an illiterate as an ASHA? What options would I have known? I regret that I could not continue to study after class ten but now I want to make sure my children get the opportunities I missed out. And all my decisions are based on a better future for my children."





Santosh



# “My daughter wants to be an engineer”

A sewing machine resounds from nine in the morning to seven at night. Colours change under the hands but the hands hardly ever seem to tire. Eyes closely watch the stitch that meticulously gives shape to a piece of cloth and magically, the outcome is a piece of finesse waiting to be flaunted. This is what an everyday in Santosh's life seems. For last 10 years she has been sewing to make a living. Remembering the time when it was different, she recollects, “I was sixteen and married. Fourteen years ago this was ‘too old’ for marriage. I had never been to school, knew nothing except for the household chores and keeping my house clean. I had always been perfectionist at whatever I did.” While speaking, her hands work around stitching labels onto *kurtas* but her eyes lose her to her memory.

Santosh had lost her husband to cancer just after 3 years of marriage and her daughter was just a month old then. Her world had suddenly come to a standstill. She knew no future and had no idea of what life has planned for her. Her husband worked at the Urmul campus as a cook. After his death, Santosh's in-laws took her back with them.



But people at Urmul persuaded the family to send her back. They said it was only wise for her to stay, work and earn for herself and her daughter. Her daughter could go to school, and she would have the support of the organization. In the village, there were little opportunities for her and she would be dependent on her old father-in-law. Santosh returned and began working in the mess kitchen earning a mere salary of thousand rupees then, a decade ago. She worked there for 6 years. In the meantime, Santosh was coaxed to take part in the various training camps that took place in the campus. She honed her skills in sewing. Soon she was asked to join the tailoring unit in the Income Generation Programme, stationed at the campus.

Describing her scepticism, she remembers, “I was worried and scared. The job in the mess earned a small but fixed amount and the tailoring unit worked on per-piece basis. It was very difficult at first and I would only be able to stitch one *kurta* in a day. But as I bettered at it, I realized how big this opportunity could become. I earned better as it was up to me to do as well as I could”.







A reflection of the years gone by and the support she has received during those most testing days overwhelms her. Continuing, she says, “This growing confidence was reinforced by my learning at the Shivir. I watched so many girls younger to me putting in their best to learn and study. I always wanted to study but did not have the opportunity to. Shivir gave me just that. Today, I manage my expenses and my savings. I earn close to ten thousand a month. I can provide for my daughter’s needs, without depending on anyone else.” Santosh went to the Shivir when her husband was still alive. She was newly wedded, quiet and shy to interact with others. She would spend all day alone at room. To open her up, pass her daytime and to learn something new, everyone coaxed her to attend the Shivir. Completing the thought, she adds, “But then I never knew how it would shape. Things have their way of becoming.”

Pramod is eleven now. Coincidentally, she too started her education at the Shivir. As a child she would go and attend the Shivir



being conducted in the campus. She loved the songs, the books and everything about it. Surprisingly, she still has memories of the time spent in different Shivirs. She talks fondly of her memories of the plays, she took part in and the bedtime stories she heard. Pramod began reading and writing by age of four. Her favourite subject is Mathematics and says, “I loves anything to do with numbers!”

Pramod is inspired by the strength she sees in her mother. “Everything she does is centered around me. Everyone tells me how afraid my mother was earlier. Even going to the village market scared her! But today, for me that’s hard to believe. I see her doing everything all by herself. Going to the bank, supporting both my grandparents, and taking care of me- she does everything.”

The mother-daughter personifies courage and confidence, defining space for them, on their own, in a male-dominant and feudalistic society. Making their stand and living by it. Today, Santosh is doing very well and is content. She manages to save close to seven thousand rupees per month and all this after supporting her daughter’s education and her maternal and marital homes. She is doing everything she possibly can do to support Pramod. Pramod understands her mother’s struggle. Her mother, teary eyed, proudly pronounces, “My daughter wants to be an engineer.”





## Acknowledgement

As have been the Balika Shivar, 'Beyond Novella' too is an outcome of collective efforts and contributions. We thank the parents and families who took a step forward to educate their girls against close and conservative norms of society in the Indian Thar. Thanks to all the teachers, motivators and facilitators who have been the backbone of these Shivirs. Thanks to all the development partners who supported innumerable Balika Shivirs for thousands of adolescent girls.

We would like to extend our special gratitude to Mr. Samuel Mawunganidze, UNICEF State Representative, Rajasthan, with whom we visualized this book. Not only did he secure the resources for this work, but also happily gave long sittings at various stages of its completion. His has been a significant, friendly and an intellectual contribution.

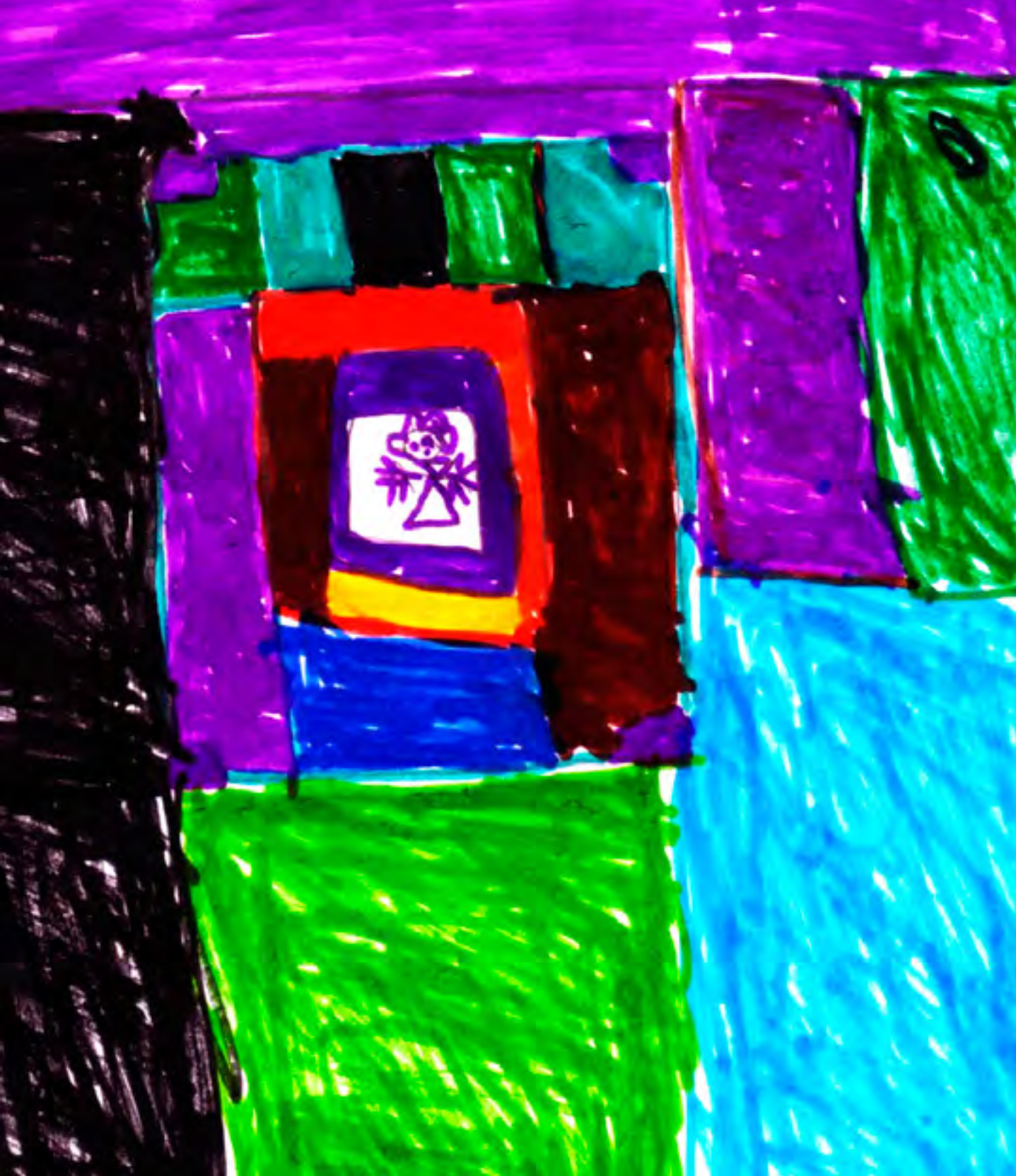
We also thank Dr. Sharda Jain at Sandhan, and, Mrs. Sushila Ojha, former Area Coordinator of Lok Jumbish, for their valuable suggestions and time for various drafts stages.

Our gracious thanks to the young writer of this book, Deepika. She has been tremendously persistence and full of enthusiasm while working on this book. Ravi and Jaya who not only took excellent photographs, designed the entire book but also coordinated the entire process. The team spent days and nights with girls and their families in the remote villages and dhanis (hamlets) of Thar Desert.

Very humbly we dedicate this book to Shri Anil Bordia, who inspired us to educate girls for a better Society and a better World. He appreciated the manuscript of this work, admired it and had promised to write a foreword.

Unfortunately on 2nd September 2012 he left this world,  
Left us stunned...  
Left us behind to continue  
With the MISSION

Arvind Ojha  
Urmul, January 2013





## Urmul

In the harsh and inhospitable regions of rural Rajasthan in the Thar Desert, URMUL Group of Organizations have been innovating models for inducing community driven socio developmental changes by devising programmes, strengthening them, sustaining and finally handing them over to communities.

Since 1984, Urmul's work is guided by the spirit and trust placed in people's capabilities to bring about the much needed social change. Most of the work is focused on vulnerable and marginalized sections of the society –Woman and children. Following the integrated development approaches, Urmul works on all the Millennium Development Goals. We adopt service delivery platforms, advocacy and lobbying tools for empowering the marginalized and vulnerable sections of society in over 1000 villages in this desert state of India- thematically working on health, Education, Livelihood, Environment, Mother-Child care et al.



Balika Shivirs significantly affected the core of Society in the desert of Thar. Since its initiation in late nineties, girls have grown-up with a better understanding of themselves, Society and the challenges ahead. Today- is different - Their eyes have learnt to recognise the inequalities of existence. Their speech lacks no courage to tell the world, close and afar- they are bringing in a change. Thousands of young women, in this desert, are opinion leaders, influencing a greater social movement for a far-reaching change. Sometimes they meet, they smile, play and sing along...

