

India

SWASTHH: India's 'clean school and village' movement

'You must meet Parvati Kumari, our Minister of Health,' says William Baa. 'She is so popular that she has been re-elected for three years in a row.' The Minister is duly summoned, along with the Prime Minister, and other Ministers for Finance, Environment, Culture and Sports. All are neatly uniformed in blue, with hair combed immaculately (boys) or braided (girls), and tidy shoes. None is over the age of 17.

This is the Child Cabinet for the Middle School in Kakaria, a remote village in Ranchi district in the Indian state of Jharkhand. Not many visitors venture into this jungle area because there is local unrest. But educational change has nonetheless reached here, in the form of a programme known as SWASTHH (School Water and Sanitation Towards Health and Hygiene). 'Swasthh' means 'health' in Hindi, and this programme is all about improving the 'health' of basic schooling. In Ranchi district alone, over 1,800 schools have benefited during the last three years.

Swasthh is one of several government initiatives aimed at changing the culture of schooling in rural India as part of the drive for 'education for all'. This is a huge undertaking: hundreds of thousands of village schools are drab, badly-constructed and under-equipped. Toilets, if they have them, are typically crude and without a

separate block for girls. Attendance is poor, classes large, much learning is by rote, and teachers and students often lack motivation. Parents may see little point in insisting their children attend, rather than do useful work at home. All these factors



Parvati and the Child Cabinet in Kakaria
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contribute to drop-out, especially among girls. If the school is not a place to which parents can safely entrust their daughters, they don't send them. Besides, no-one learns – or teaches – well in a down-at-heel environment.

Training and transformation

Teachers' training and curriculum reform are also in hand, but they go side by side





Parvati demonstrates how to wash hands

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with physical improvement. The transformation of the school environment under Swasthh, including décor inside and outside the classroom, better sanitation facilities, planting of flower and vegetable gardens, emphasis on cleanliness, closer links with parents and community members, and better turn-out of students, help generate high morale. Child Cabinets are helping to make that happen, and as far as hygiene is concerned, the key person is the Minister of Health.

Every day, Parvati arrives at Kakaria school early, and checks the condition of the compound. She has a roster of helpers, and she puts them to work, cleaning and sweeping. 'Everyone in the school has to play their part', she says. And this includes regular washing and scrubbing of the toilets. These are extremely basic – in fact there are only two, so they are allocated for girls' use only. Parvati ensures that, throughout the day, they are kept clean and pleasant. 'If there is a problem and a new girl does not know proper toilet usage, I ask a member of staff to explain.' Similarly, children who come to school unwashed, without shoes, with dirty finger-nails or hair in a mess, will be gently taken in hand. Parents are told through the Village Education Committee that personal hygiene for students is a must. Every student contributes to the funds collected by the Minister of Finance. They pay for replenishments of soap, brushes and cleanser.

A definite change

William Baa, head teacher at Kakaria, says that since Swasthh arrived in 2005, he has seen a definite change in health and hygiene, and a greater interest in education in the community generally. The Child Cabinet is part of that: to be elected brings status to the child and the family. 'Every year we hold an assembly for all 680 students. The students and teachers give their views about candidates for different jobs.' Those selected are given training, and there are also sessions with teachers, Education Committee members, and the school at large. When Ministers do well in their jobs, they are awarded prizes.

This school is one of 2,830 schools in Jharkhand to be reached by Swasthh, and every school is different – in size, facilities, student make-up, and local familiarity with toilets and hygiene. Experience shows that repeated rounds of training and familiarization with new concepts work. Because Kakaria is remote, some aspects are not as strong as they might be. There is as yet no toilet for boys; even Parvati cannot recite with confidence the causes of diarrhoea; and a solid



The Ministry of Gardening maintains the garden

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fence to secure the compound has not yet been built. The Minister for Gardening is unable to grow vegetables in the face of marauding goats.

At Reshan, a much less remote village elsewhere in the district, the school has been taken into its heart by the community since Swasthh arrived – everything that happens there is a source of local pride. The compound is fenced with criss-crossed barbed wire, the gardening ministry tends neat flower and vegetable beds, and mothers incorporate the produce into daily school meals. The Swasthh décor team have painted hygiene messages all over the walls in bright yellow, and the Minister of Water dispenses water from the special water vessel, which no fingers or hands are allowed to touch.

Ashok Berai, president of the Village Education Committee, says: ‘Up to 2005, diarrhoea was a rampant problem here. After Swasthh, radical changes have come. Children started trimming their nails and washing their hands with soap, and insisting that their parents do so as well. Garbage used to be thrown outside the house.

Now people dig pits and bury it. Children tell their mothers to wash their hands before cooking and eating, and their mothers do what they say. In two years, we have really seen a difference. Diseases have dropped considerably and the village is clean.’



The Swasthh Décor at the Reshan School
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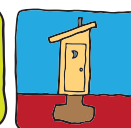
No Child Cabinet is complete without a Minister of Culture. In Kakaria, children joyfully take part in music, songs and dancing. In Reshan, the focus is on dramas. This is how the Cabinet helped spread messages to the community, according to Ashok Berai. ‘The teachers taught the children plays, and when the old people were relaxing in the village square in the evening, the children would come and perform their dramas. Then everyone discussed the issues.’ The Child Cabinet in Reshan has also organized rallies, taking the sanitation message around the community from door to door.

Construction is easy, but behavioural change is not

Swasthh grew out of a programme, also backed by UNICEF, that began nearly a decade ago to construct water and toilet blocks in schools. But it quickly became clear that installing facilities – essential though it is that boys and girls have their own places to ‘go’ – was not the critical aspect. Construction is easy, but behavioural

Sanitation and Puberty

Parvati Kumari, Kakaria’s Minister of Health, particularly impressed Headmaster William Baa by her prompt action when a girl was taken ill. ‘She informed a member of staff, and then she accompanied the patient to the health centre. This was reassuring for the parents, and we were all most impressed.’ Inquiry reveals that the girl had fainted in class and caused great alarm. This is not an easy subject to broach, but it seems likely that this was the onset of menstruation and the girl was bleeding profusely. Parents frequently withdraw their girls at puberty, but if they can see that they are taken care of and their needs respected, they are much more likely to let them continue to attend. The story will have been passed around, and other parents reassured too.





The Reshan Minister of Water

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change is not. One issue was maintenance: who was going to look after the sanitation blocks and keep them clean? Another was knowledge: children and parents knew far too little about health and hygiene. Out of this came the focus on school governance, to combine understanding with a change in parent-teacher-student respect for the whole school environment.

Sukanya Subramanian, UNICEF Education Project Officer for Jharkhand, emphasizes that such a transformation, especially one that the

whole community buys into, takes time. For example, when Child Cabinets were first introduced, some teachers did not take the lead in the way expected. 'We found some Cabinets were being used as an unpaid work force for school cleaning and other tasks. So we had to introduce much more training and orientation – for everyone.' Another problem was to persuade Education Department staff at local, district, and state level to own the project instead of leaving it to sanitary engineers. 'Swasthh is about changing attitudes – not building things. That is an educational aim', says Sukanya. 'It is hard to convince education and engineering staff to see things differently and join forces, but we have made huge progress.'

Since 2005, Swasthh has been known as 'Swasthh Plus' – the 'Plus' meaning 'Putting lessons to Use'. Schools in Jharkhand and Karnataka nowadays receive funds for toilet block construction and barbed wire fences from the sanitary engineering budget, while educationalists have used Swasthh to focus on health and hygiene messages and school governance. From 2008, lessons learned over 10 years in how to pull the different strands together are to be incorporated into the nation-wide push for 'education for all', targeted to growing numbers of India's millions of schools. Through the drive for 'a clean school and village', everyone has a stake in a brighter future.

Contact: UNICEF
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017 USA
www.unicef.org/wes



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