

A school without toilets

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) play an important role in girls' education. Lack of water and sanitation facilities often prevents girls from attending schools, leading to an uncertain future. The Maigri Estate Inter College in Garur Block in Bageshwar District of Uttarakhand is a government institution with good classroom infrastructure and a sports ground. Yet, it lacks the most basic structure-toilets. About 21 kms away from Bageshwar, this inter-college offers education from class VI to XII and has a student population of around 400, half of them girls

KHUSBU BORA, Pinglo Village, Garur Bageshwar District, Uttarakhand

Babita, a student of 11th Standard, wants to attend school every day, but the biggest hurdle to achieving that is the lack of toilet facilities. "Coming to school during menstruation or before that is not even an option. Where do we change our pads?" expressed Babita. Lack of clean drinking water is another issue that often determines the attendance of students. Tanjua, another student in the 10th Standard, said,

"There is no facility for clean drinking water, which results in various sicknesses and our education gets hampered. Due to the lack of such facilities, many parents enrol their boys in schools situated in cities. On the other hand, girls are far from availing these options as most parents do not allow girls to stay away from their villages. We are bound to complete our education amid these shortcomings."

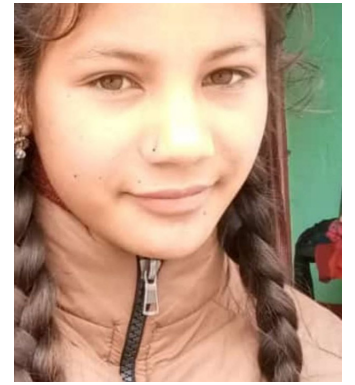
A UNICEF report also underlines how essential safe, single sex and hygiene facilities are for menstrual hygiene management (MHM) without which girls can struggle to attend and stay in school. However, most government schools do not have this basic necessity, affecting the education of the students, mostly girls. Recently, a report, while quoting official data, says more than 1000 schools in Uttarakhand do not possess functional toilets on their premises.

Puneet Joshi, a teacher from the school, understands the need for these basic requirements and advocates for better facilities for the students. "Girls from rural areas are equally talented as their urban counterparts. Compared to boys, many girls have brought laurels to their areas by topping Classes 10th and 12th, while some girls have made the school proud by participating in various activities. But due to the shortcomings in these few basic facilities, many don't get the space to continue their interests," Puneet explained.

"Teachers make every effort to provide quality education to the students, which shows in their results. But when girls quit school because of a lack of basic facilities, it is a waste of our hard work," Puneet added.

While admitting the lack of clean drinking water and toilets, Kuldeep Koranga, the principal of the school, said, "It is possible to solve this problem with the help of villagers and panchayat for which efforts are being made." On the other hand, Usha Devi, the sarpanch of Maigri Estate, also considers it important to take notice of the lack of the principle facilities in the school. "Efforts would be made to resolve this problem at the panchayat level as soon as possible so that the education of these children is not hampered," said Usha.

Many girls belonging to remote villages are enrolled in this school, such as Loha Gari, which is about 26 km from Maigri Estate. They walk nearly an hour to reach school and then



Student writer Khusbu Bora.

another hour back to their villages. Walking such distances and staying in a place without proper toilets and clean water for extended periods of time can be hazardous to their health. Certainly, they would prefer to skip their classes during menstruation to avoid such major challenges, given that there is no possible solution yet.

Undoubtedly, the school authorities and the villagers are taking all possible steps to make these facilities available to the students. However, effective steps need to be taken at the earliest in order to provide the girls a safe space to prosper and grow without having them worry about proper sanitation facilities. Inclusion of such facilities will not only empower the girls but also keep them away from gendered violence. ■

Note: The writer is a 11th Standard student from Maigri Estate Inter College, Garur, Bageshwar.

(Courtesy: Charkha Features)



A picture of Maigri Estate Inter-college.

Photos: KB

A generation of displaced persons wait in vain for rehabilitation

Evacuees who made way for dam projects are struggling to avail of promised benefits for 50 years and more. A well-coordinated nationwide effort to complete delayed and inadequate rehabilitation efforts connected to all dam projects is urgently needed

More half a century ago, more than 20000 families living in villages in the beautiful Kangra Region of Himachal Pradesh were asked to leave their homes to make way for the Pong Dam on the River Beas. The land there was so fertile that it produced bountiful and diverse crops without the need for chemical fertilisers or pesticides. So, people were reluctant to leave their homes, particularly since the resettlement area allotted to them was in distant Rajasthan.

Lured by the promise of irrigated land and many facilities, they finally left their homes for the new land. But 50 years on, the second generation of these displaced families is still struggling for rehabilitation benefits.

To help secure the benefits, the Pong Bandh Visthapit Samiti (Pong Dam Evictees Committee) was set up. On March 4, a delegation from the organisation met the Union Minister of State for Water Resources when he visited Himachal Pradesh, but, as they told media persons later, they did not get a satisfactory response from him on the problems they raised. In a press note, the committee said 20772 families were displaced, but only 16352 were found eligible for land allotment and even of these, only about 5000 had been rehabilitated properly till date. The figures are slightly different in other reports, but they all agree that a significant percentage of displaced persons have not been rehabilitated.

The original idea was that the project would be able to irrigate lands in the Ganganagar Region of Rajasthan and these lands would be given to the displaced families to cultivate. However, the availability of water sent land prices soaring, and this in turn led to encroachments by powerful persons, making it difficult for the newcomers to occupy and cultivate the area. Many found that all they were able to do was complain about the encroachments, while others were allotted alternative land in the more remote areas of Jaisalmer which lacked even the most basic facilities. And how could people used to the cold weather of Himachal Pradesh survive in the extreme heat of the Thar Desert?

Many families were unable to settle down at the places given to them, or to cultivate the land allotted to them, or both. Ideally, satisfactory rehabilitation should have been completed in about five years. Prolonged legal cases were a fallout of the situation. To what extent people evicted from their land and deprived of their livelihood are able to fight legal battles can be imagined. In time, the problem assumed the colour of a Himachal vs Rajasthan dispute, with the latter being accused of not fulfilling its part of the rehabilitation agreement relating to the dam and irrigation canal. It was felt that if the Rajasthan Government was unable to arrange for satisfactory rehabilitation of displaced persons, then it should pay for such rehabilitation in Himachal Pradesh itself. News of committee meetings and legal cases in this connection still appear from time to time, even though over five decades have passed since the people were displaced.

Surprisingly, even those displaced by the much-publicised Bhakra Dam Project have not been satisfactorily rehabilitated yet, even though the development preceded the Pong Dam displacement by a few years. Also, the land acquisition for the Hirakund Dam Project in Odisha had started even earlier and there are still complaints of unsatisfactory rehabilitation. ■

Bharat Dogra, New Delhi