

# HISUA: India's First Child Labor Free Block

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*"We have been desperately trying to stop children from working in the brick-kilns for years, in vain. The legal loopholes always helped the kiln owners get away. Thanks to the 'Happy Hisua' program, we succeeded in our mission for the first time in so many years," says 52-year-old Lalaram, a Legal Enforcement Officer (LEO) of the Nawada district.*

*Twelve-year-old Kamlesh of Hisua block, about 15 kms from the district headquarter of Nawada, asked the District Magistrate, N Vijayalakshmi, a simple question after being released from being a child laborer. "I will definitely attend school. But how will my family survive, as I am the sole wage earner in the household. My father is no more and my siblings are all very young." Pat came the reply, "Your mother being a widow will be a beneficiary of the Widow Pension Scheme of the state government."*

*On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2002, an entire block (administrative subdivision of a district) – Hisua of Nawada district in Bihar – was declared 'child labor free'; the first such instance in India. Within a span of a 100 days, all the child laborers of the block were removed from work and admitted to formal schools. This unique experiment; called the 'Happy Hisua' campaign was carried out jointly with the active participation of the district administration and the civil society organisations.*

## **Introduction**

Bihar, the second most populous and one of the most backward Indian states, has the lowest literacy rate and per capita income coupled with the endemic problem of child labor.<sup>2</sup> It accounts for 5.29 percent of India's geographical area and over 10 percent of the country's total population. Agriculture is the mainstay of the state's economy accounting for 45 percent of its income. Eighty percent of the people depend on agriculture for their livelihood. According to the 1981 census, Bihar had 0.9 million child laborers; 85 percent of them in agriculture with another 8.64 percent working as mechanics, domestic servants, or in tea stalls and *dhabas* (eating joints). A survey done by the state labor department in 1997, estimated 24,879 children working in hazardous occupations.<sup>3</sup>

The district of Nawada comprising 14 blocks with a population of 18,09,425 and a literacy rate of 46.95 percent for males and 26.30 percent for females, according to the 2001 census, has 3,02,236 children between 6-14 years. A survey report on the status of child labor, prepared by a group of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in 2002, reveals that the district has 11,442 children working in both hazardous and non-hazardous occupations; with a significant proportion – 1089, belonging to Hisua block.

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<sup>1</sup> Shukla Basu is a New Delhi based independent researcher. She would like to thank all the people at Patna, Nawada and Hisua, especially Dr. Nil Ratan, Satyanarayan Madan, N Vijayalakshmi, Madan Kumar, Vijay Singh, Lalaram, Mukhtarul Haque, and all the others who gave her an insight into the program and spent days going around the block with her. A special word of appreciation goes to Rafay Eajaz Hussain for his paper, 'An Interim Appraisal Report on 'Happy Hisua Campaign' done for the UNICEF, Bihar; which has been liberally drawn on, at various places, for the purpose of this report. She is also grateful to Kailash Satyarthi, Chairperson, SACCS for useful discussions and suggestions and to Sudhanshu Joshi of ICCLE for his comments on an earlier draft this paper.

<sup>2</sup> 'Bihar's lawless ways': Arvind N. Das. 1999. The UNESCO Courier.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.childlaborbihar.com>

Despite a plethora of laws, replete with a numerous clauses and sub-clauses for the betterment of the child laborers, they remain a wretched lot: thanks to an apathetic government machinery and a lack of political will to eradicate child labor in its entirety.

The government does have a number of programs for the child laborers. Foremost among them is the National Child Labor Program (NCLP), an all India program, under which 85 special schools, with a capacity for 6500 child laborers have been started in three districts of Bihar: Saharsa, Nalanda and Jamui. This program is under the aegis of the Department of Labor, Government of India and 6382 children have been admitted to these schools in the academic year 2001-2002.

Furthermore, a number of NGOs in Nawada – as elsewhere in Bihar – like the Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA) and the Bihar Seva Sansthan have also been active in the realm of child labor; be it their rescue, rehabilitation or in awareness building of the masses. Yet, the work of both the government and the NGOs never being combined or concerted, no tangible results were achieved. Children continued to languish in both hazardous and non-hazardous occupations.

The situation changed in 2002, when the present District Magistrate (DM) and Collector of Nawada, N Vijayalakshmi, took up the issue. Generally sensitive to the issue of child bondage and child labor, she wanted to “do something substantial for them.” A series of meetings with the relevant individuals working on child labor in the state and a brief spell at the three SACCS/BBA<sup>4</sup> initiatives – Bal Ashram, Mukti Ashram and the Girls’ Collective, which are rehabilitation centres for released child laborers; more specifically bonded children – made her more resolute.

Appreciating the fact that these midway homes are a succor for the released child laborers – where they are trained educationally and vocationally, given a life of dignity and are taught to fight for their own and others’ rights – the scourge of child labor, nevertheless, has to be thwarted at the roots. In short, child labor has to be stopped. In a state like Bihar, which is plagued by every conceivable malady, this is easier thought of than done. The basic factor that had to be considered, however, was that it had to be a collaborative endeavor between the government and the civil society.

Once the fundamentals had been chalked out, the DM proceeded to actualize this at the grassroots level.

### **The Process**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2002, a ‘District Vision Exercise (DVE)’ was held at the Collectorate of Nawada under the supervision of Dr. Nil Ratan, Professor of Political Science at the A N Sinha Institute of Social Sciences, Patna. The initiative for organizing this one-day exercise was taken by Saurabh Suman of Bihar Seva Sansthan, a local NGO in coordination with Augustine Veliath of UNICEF, Patna. The other participants at the ‘exercise’ were the DM along with prominent members of the district administration, local NGOs like the BBA activists, elected representatives

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<sup>4</sup> *Bachpan Bachao Andolan* essentially means ‘Save the Childhood’ Movement. SACCS (South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude) is the network of NGOs, while BBA comprises individual activists – all working towards the elimination of child servitude.

of the newly constituted Panchayati Raj Institutions (local self-governance) and media persons. At the end of the `exercise', a decision was taken to make the Hisua block of Nawada district `child labor free' within a 100 days -- that is on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2002. It was also decided that a committee would be formed, comprising representatives of the district administration along with the labor, education and the agricultural departments of Hisua block, the NGOs and the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The program would be named `Happy Hisua' and the committee `Happy Hisua Committee.'

Hisua was chosen for various reasons. Nawada district has 14 blocks. A Block Development Officer (BDO) and a Circle Officer (CO) should head each block, but Nawada has only four BDOs and the number of COs are also not adequate. Hisua has both a BDO and a CO. Moreover, the *panchayat* (local self-government body) representatives of Hisua are more active than their counterparts in other blocks. The most appealing factor was that Hisua block is the nearest to Nawada town, about a 15 kms away. Travel for the people concerned would be cheaper, faster and as an experiment would be the most conducive to work on. Later, in the course of the program, the second survey done by the NGOs showed that Hisua block also had the largest concentration of child laborers in the whole district.

Following the DVE, the team, the `Happy Hisua Committee,' under the guidance of Vijayalakshmi, took up the onerous and challenging task of implementing the work-plan to get the aspired results of the `Happy Hisua' program. A meeting was organised with all the representatives of the *nagar* (town) and *gram* (village) *panchayats* of the block on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 2002. The district survey report on child labor, prepared in December 2001, was discussed in this meeting. It was decided that a second survey would be conducted to ascertain the actual number of children involved in any kind of work in the block. A survey format was developed for this purpose.

Once the second survey was completed, it showed a very different picture from the earlier one. The number of child labor was surprisingly low in the second survey report. The reason for this difference was attributed to the non-visibility of children working in *agarbatti* (incense) making. This is a home-based industry and the parents and kin here were too scared to reveal that their children worked along with them. Although these children worked at home, they were nevertheless, admitted to schools and were regular students; lending a hand in the family business in their free time. The other reason for the sharp drop in the number of child laborers was that the brick kilns of the area (which work seasonally and have a large number of children working gratis along with migrant parents) were closed at the time of the survey.

The team met again on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September and discussed on the plan of action to be adopted. According to one proposal, all the leaders of the 10 *gram* panchayats and the Chairman of the *nagar* panchayat should be made responsible for freeing all the child labor in their area and getting them enrolled in government schools. Another proposal was that the labor department would give notice to all the brick-kiln owners in the block to spare all the child laborers from any work in the forthcoming season of brick making.

The LEO of the block was entrusted with the task of freeing the child laborers and giving notice to the brick kiln owners as well as facilitating the work of other government officials in this respect. After about three weeks, when it was noticed

that the concerned LEO had been quite apathetic in his work and no concrete results were perceived, he was given a reminder. When this failed to work, the DM was left with no other option but to suggest his suspension to the Labor Commissioner. The removal of the LEO sent the message to the other government officials of the block that the DM was extremely serious about the issue and its final outcome within the specified timeframe.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 2002, the DM called another meeting to take stock of the progress made and here four LEOs – Lalaram, Vijay Singh, Vasudev Pandey and Syed Sirajal Hasan, were deputed from other blocks of Nawada and given the responsibility of total elimination of child labor from Hisua block. The work done by these LEOs is praiseworthy as they worked with a missionary zeal seldom seen amongst government officials in India.

“We would be up at the crack of dawn and proceed towards Hisua on our motorbikes, public transports or would hitch a ride. A unique feature of the ‘Happy Hisua’ program was that not a rupee was spent on it – government or otherwise. Whatever money was spent was from our own salaries. We made many enemies in the process. Some *dhaba* owners, who recruited child laborers tried to bribe us, often threatening us with dire consequences; so that we would let their child workers be. But we stood our grounds. These owners were given notices and being aware of the drive, they gradually yielded to the pressure and let the children be taken out of their employment,” says Vijay Singh, LEO.

Adds Lalaram, “During those days, seeing us, the *dhaba* owners would quickly make the child workers pose as customers and serve them a lot of goodies. The result was that a lot of children got to eat food that they only served earlier and just dreamt of eating. But we had the children identified and we would lurk around, catching them the minute they got down to work. There were times when the children instructed by their employers would run at the sight of us. I haven’t run for years but even I would chase the boys and eventually catch them. This earned us the name of *butru pakarwa* (one who catches children) by the employers and subsequently by the general public. They meant it as a stigma but we were proud of the insignia. For the first time in our lives, we felt we were doing something worthwhile.”

The LEOs, however, give all the credit for this to their superiors – the DM and the BDO – who would even get down to meetings at unearthly hours to evolve strategies for tackling a particularly difficult employer or attend to other urgent matters, which needed immediate attention. Officially, only one LEO is supposed to work in a block; but the scheme of putting four LEOs to accomplish the task at hand helped tremendously. The LEOs say that any one of them alone could not have achieved the desired results, as it required a team to handle the tricky situations, which always arose when a raid was being conducted. The team spirit and the mutual understanding between the four LEOs worked wonders while dealing with the difficult situation in the field. There were times when the DM herself would take part in some particularly challenging raids in the block headquarter area as well as in the remote parts of rural Hisua, along with her contingent. Seeing that the administration was in dead earnest about the issue, the rest of the government staff would also transcend their usual job requirements to pitch in whenever necessary.

While the government was active in the campaign, others like the representatives of the panchayat and the NGOs were equally involved in the realization of the

objectives. The reason that they were involved from the very phase of planning and strategizing made them take the ownership of the task at hand and work hard.

The panchayat representatives, whether it was the Chairman, the Members of Nagar Panchayat or Block Samiti or *Mukhiya (head)* and Ward Members of the Gram Panchayats, helped the district administration at every step to obviate child labor from their block. Their outreach and knowledge of the area and the population living there was a great asset of this campaign.

The NGOs' participation was, however, more dynamic, motivated and exemplary. Though the initiative to organize the DVE was taken by the District Administration and the Bihar Seva Sansthan funded the organization of it; not many other NGOs came forward, apart from Saurabh Suman and her team from the Bihar Seva Sansthan along with Mukhtarul Haque, in his individual capacity of a BBA representative in the district and as secretary of the District Total Literacy Campaign participated in the campaign, providing all the support to the district administration.

The BBA has always played a very active role in awareness building on issues like child labor, migration and the rest ever since its inception. Bihar, in particular, has seen more of it for the past seven years when the 'Mukti Karwan Campaign' (see Appendix 1) was started. The 'Shiksha Yatra' (see Appendix 2), which was conducted by the SACCS/BBA, charted its course through Nawada, where a number of denizens participated.

During the 'Happy Hisua' campaign, the 'Mukti Karwan' unit of the BBA played a very significant role. They performed *nukkad nataks* (street plays) in various villages and in Hisua town from the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 2002. The street plays, which were based on the evils of child labor and were performed by freed children themselves, had a tremendous effect on the psyche of the local people.<sup>5</sup>

Seeing these actors, the bleakness of the circumstances – of child labor, poverty, of there being no hope and no future – were somewhat removed from the minds of the child laborers, their parents and the villagers in general. Here was living proof of what a child laborer can become once taken out of work and given a chance in life.

Moreover, the BBA had also arranged for a *bal chaupal* (public hearing of children), whose main petitioners were the newly released child laborers, who narrated their tales of despair during their 'child laborer' days and were exuberant of their newly-found freedom and of being sent to school; their dreams for the future. The *bal chaupal* was attended by thousands of people from the block, belonging to different castes, community and social strata. Both the *nukkad natak* and the *bal chaupal* gave an enormous boost to the awareness and sensitisation of the people and formed the backbone of the whole campaign.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of December, the DM called another meeting to consider the rehabilitation of the children who have been freed. In this meeting, it was resolved that all the families of the freed child laborers would be helped under different government

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<sup>5</sup> These eight young actors, aged 15 to 18 years, are the ex-inmates of the two boys' Ashrams run by the SACCS/BBA, where they had undergone educational and vocational training. They had opted for 'theatre training' as part of their vocational course while at the Ashrams. Now they receive a salary of Rs. 1800 (US\$37.5), are bright, confident and vociferous.

schemes/programs, which will help improve their economic condition. A card, called the 'Bal Mitra Card,' (child friendly card), was devised which had the released child's name, personal details and the various schemes the child's family was entitled to, depending on their circumstances and entitlement.

In this regard, the concerned officials were directed to make special arrangements for getting the forms filled and get the funds released to the beneficiaries. Subsequently, the family members of the freed child laborers filled 71 forms under different schemes. These schemes were under the Bihar State Other Backward Cases Corporation, Special Component Plan for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and many more. Besides, the concerned officials were also directed to facilitate the identified families into getting benefits from other government schemes such as 'Annapurna', 'Antodaya', scholarships to the needy students as well as handicapped children, widow pensions, old age pensions and mid-day meal for the school-going children.

In short, all the concerned officials and panchayat representatives were asked to strengthen the existing schemes and programs of the government and ensure that all the need gets the benefits. A list of all those children who had either no parents alive or had parents living in a state of despondency, was also made so that they could be sent to the Ashrams run by the SACCS/BBA.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, it was decided at another committee meeting that on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, every panchayat *mukhiya* would take out a *padayatra* (procession) in his/her panchayat for another spell of awareness raising and sensitization. The Chairman of the Nagar Panchayat too was given the responsibility of taking out a similar *padayatra* on the 15<sup>th</sup> of December all over Hisua town, the block headquarter.

As part of working hand-in-hand with the civil society, bankers of the region were also brought in the fold. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, the DM had a meeting with the Managers of different banks working in the block and asked them to speed up the process of loan sanction to the families of freed child laborers under the various existing schemes prevalent with the banks. She also informed the participants at the meeting of her decision to set up a 'Women and Child Development Centre' in the block, which was to be inaugurated on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2002; the day earmarked for the official declaration of Hisua as a 'Child Labor Free Block'.

At this meeting, the people working in the field reported that almost all of Hisua block has been made child labor free, except for a few who are not at all visible or traceable. There were a total of 291 children found to be working in hazardous occupation, 117 children working in non-hazardous occupation and 35 children were caught while conducting raids. All of these children were freed from work and were enrolled in the nearby government schools. Besides, some more children who were not working and were not in schools either were enrolled in the local schools. The total number of enrolled children during the 'Happy Hisua' campaign was 754.

"Those days were was so much excitement that the very air seemed charged. There would be posters, hoardings and banners all around, proclaiming the ills of child labor; mikes would be atop rickshaws and three-wheelers, blaring songs composed on issues of education, child labor and the rest; slogans and processions comprising the DM, government officials, ministers, children and anybody who cared to join in, would be very common. Even the local newspapers and those from the state capital

would carry a column or two about the progress every day. On the final day, most local newspapers carried full-page articles on items related to child labor, absolutely free of charge. The hype that was built up leading to the final day was quite unprecedented." Says Mukhtarul Haque, the local BBA Coordinator and Secretary of the District Total Literacy Campaign.

Hisua was officially declared "child labor free" – the first such example in India – on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2002, with a huge fanfare. A function was arranged on the grounds of the local government school and was attended by a mammoth gathering.

"The state of Bihar will be free from the evil clutches of child labor within a year", pledged Laloo Prasad Yadav, the ex Chief Minister of Bihar and supremo of the state ruling party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, before a strong crowd of nearly 15,000, gathered for the function. His promise brought hope and smiles on the faces of thousands of people, including released bonded child laborers, other children, state ministers, civil society leaders, government officials and social activists.

In the meeting, the chief guest Kailash Satyarthi, Chairperson of SACCS/BBA, set the tone by saying that the state cannot dream of sustainable development, social justice and good governance without ensuring quality and meaningful education to all children. He urged the political leadership to take a pro-active approach towards eradication of child labor. "The future will be dark if a light is not lit now," proclaimed Satyarthi. Reacting towards the official announcement, he suggested that a sufficient system should be established with community participation to sustain the impact in Nawada and should later be transferred to all the other parts of the state. Shortly after this, came the historic declaration from Yadav that the state of Bihar would be made child labor free within a year and all children would be admitted in schools. He also asserted that the village institution and district administration would be streamlined to coordinate various projects in ending child labor.<sup>6</sup>

But the 17<sup>th</sup> of December was not really the end of the 'child labor free' drive; it was only the beginning. The child laborers of the block had been identified, freed and enrolled in schools. Now lay the challenging task of keeping them in school and not returning to work.

### **The Aftermath**

Apart from the strategies devised by the 'Happy Hisua' Committee to keep the children from going back to work (see Box 1) the BBA too jumped in the fray. Anilji, the veteran trainer of Bal Mitra Grams (Child Friendly Villages) from the central office of the SACCS/BBA in New Delhi spent four days in the block from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2003 giving a series of 'orientations' to the various stakeholders who would now be responsible for sustaining the effort.

Day 1 was earmarked for the Government functionaries who would play an advisory role. The orientation module here comprised as to how the Block or District Education Officer would guide the teachers, the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme) and the health department workers.

On Day 2, the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members were made aware of strategies to keep the villages under their tutelage child labor free. Here the module consisted of how to mobilize the *gram sabha* (village assembly); the various ways in

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<sup>6</sup> Child Labor News Service: 18 December 2002 (<http://www.globalmarch.org>).

which children from different categories and social and economic strata can be put in schools; how the children whose families fall 'Below Poverty Line (BPL)' and children out of school can be identified and the appropriate government schemes can be allotted to them or their families. These PRI members were also told how they could bridge the communication gap that exists between the gram panchayats and the teachers as well as the village community at large; so that in future they could all work towards their common goal in unison. The goal being that the quality of education has to be insisted on and how the panchayat can evaluate or give suggestion to the teachers in this respect.

All the teachers of the government schools of the block were the next group to be 'oriented' the following day – Day 3. The teachers were told how they could have the newly released child laborers admitted in the government schools. If the schools have no vacancies, the kinds of alternatives they could think of, for the children. The most important feature that the teachers were told of was the innovative approaches they had to adopt in the handling of these children. Being erstwhile child laborers, belonging to the lowest section of society, these children were bound to be ostracized by their peers; they would also be far below the level of a particular class and curriculum, with respect to their age. Their promotions to the next higher classes would necessarily have to be related to their performance. If a particular child progressed faster than his peers, he need not wait for the end-of-year promotion but could forge ahead to the next higher class, till he was in a class suitable for his age. And the teachers had to be sensitive in the proper management of these special children, so that studying and attending school for them would be a joyful experience.

On the fourth and the last day, it was the turn of the parents and children of the block. These orientation sessions were open to all, but on this day, the newly released child laborers and their parents, who were mostly laborers again, were particularly encouraged to attend. The benefits of a proper education and its long-term effects and the role of the parents were explained to the target group. The last session was also attended by the DM and a number of government officials; who again reiterated about the government schemes that the children and their parents were entitled to and the mode in which it had to be done.

**Box 1: Strategies for sustainability**

- 1) All the released child laborers will be entitled to mid-day meals, scholarships and various other incentives, to prevent dropouts.
- 2) The families of the former child laborers will also be the beneficiaries of various government schemes according to their eligibility, so that the wages earned from the children's' labor would be compensated.
- 3) Every *anganbari* (pre-school) has been provided with pre-school kits. Each *anganbari* worker has been given the responsibility teaching and overseeing the health of children aged 0-6 years. They would also be in charge of the proper immunized of their wards and their mothers, especially the pregnant ones. When the laborer parents go out to work; the very young children are generally the responsibility of their elder siblings, especially sisters, who consequently have no opportunity to study. The *anganbari* worker and the head, ICDS should see to it that their interventions be such that every child gets a chance to study.
- 4) Every panchayat head should necessarily form a cell and keep a track of every child laborer that have been admitted to school, ensuring that none of these children ever go back to work again by having discussions with their parents and teachers once in a while. They would try to empower the ex child laborers as well as the parents by guiding them to the government scheme appropriate for them; and seeing to it that they receive the benefits.

- 5) The officials of every bank of Hisua should help the parents make use of the various government schemes, like the PMRY, GSSY and the rest; so that their economic conditions improve and they do not harbor any resentment that their children have been taken out of work and subsequently there is suffering all around.
- 6) It would be the duty of every LEO to take a child off from work and admit her/him in the nearest government school. They would also see to it that the parents and every other laborer get proper employment. They should also be ready to take legal measures against the employers, if they ever make a child work.
- 7) The BDO and the Women's Development Cell should start self-help groups for the parents of the ex child laborers and link them to the banks to help them economically.
- 8) The Chairman, Vice Chairman of the *nagar* Panchayat, all the ward members, the sarpanch (head) and the members of all the 10 panchayats should make it their responsibility to spread the message of the evils of child labor in every nook and corner of their area and create awareness against child labor, so that the objectives program, which was so successful remain sustained.
- 9) The District Education Officer would start work relating to the 'Education Guarantee Scheme' and 'Education for All', to strengthen the education system.

### Lessons learnt

- a) When the highest authority of a domain – in this case, the DM – wants to lead a campaign with all genuineness and sincerity, then the targeted results will not be difficult to achieve. The DM of Nawada, Vijayalakshmi, showed the country that given a will, nothing is impossible.
- b) Any campaign against child labor requires the involvement of all the stakeholders – especially the PRIs. The PRIs have tremendous resources and tapping them requires a sincere motivation and regular follow-up.
- c) All the stakeholders must be involved in the program right from day one. This makes them take the ownership of the venture; their performance being linked to the ownership and not because of orders from above.
- d) The role of the NGOs in the campaign has been quite exemplary. The DVE was organised by an NGO, Bihar Seva Sansthan, working in the rehabilitation of child laborers. The initial interest and motivation of the DM towards the issue of child labor came from the rehabilitation centres of SACCS/BBA in Delhi and Jaipur. Moreover the awareness building through the mobile campaign of the BBA, and the 'Mukti Karwan,' went a long way in etching the issues of child labor and education in the minds of the local people as the skits and one-act plays had local color and were performed by the former child laborers themselves. In addition, the BBA also organised rallies, meetings and workshops all over the block with a view to sensitize the area on the said issues. The '*bal chaupal*' held at the end of the 'Mukti Karwan' was also another unique event that captured the imagination of the local people, when they got to hear of the woes of the child laborers, first-hand.
- e) The 'Convergent Approach', where all the government schemes are focused with a view to benefiting both the children released from child labor and their parents, is another inimitable feature of the program. Though it is too early to say anything about the success of the approach in Hisua; yet, according to the DM, if she had to replicate the same campaign in another place, she would apply the convergent approach and rehabilitation work right from the beginning of the whole process. It is a fact that if only all the existing schemes, programs and services of the government is provided to the deserving beneficiaries in a proper manner, then half the battle against the evil of child labor anywhere in the country will be over. This is most evident in the case of the schools and other service systems of the government that provides primary education and health care to the children.

- f) As a first step towards making the block child labor free, the district administration adopted a target approach. The entire government machinery of the block, along with the elected PRI representatives and the BBA activists worked in unison towards making all the children in a block free and enrolling them in schools in a record time.
- g) The number of child laborers freed in Hisua were invariably mostly boys; the girls being 'invisible' due to the fact that they mostly worked at home – helping in the household chores or looking after younger siblings. To relieve these young girls from the chores and giving them freedom to attend school, the *anganbari* workers were asked to gear up in their responsibilities towards the preschool children, in every respect.
- h) Repeated meetings, a constant monitoring and the easy approachability that the DM had devised (contrary to protocol), on any problems that her contingent faced regarding the program gave the message to all that the DM was extremely serious about the issue and the program. This also worked as an energizer to the subordinates, like the four LEOs, who had been frustrated in previous attempts and who put in all their efforts in the task at hand.
- i) When there is a spirit of volunteerism and of having dreams fulfilled – funds are no impediment. The entire exercise of Hisua was achieved without spending a single penny – government or otherwise. The motivated LEOs worked wonders, giving in all their might.
- j) The entire exercise was done in a focused manner and that too within a target period of a 100 days. According to the DM, this has also made every one work with a sense of urgency, which produced the required results in the given timeframe.

### **Afterword**

Six months down the line... after Hisua was declared a 'Child Labor Free Block'...

A huge placard stands at the entrance to the block on the main State Highway, proclaiming Hisua to be the first child labor free block in the country. In a state where child labor is visible everywhere, even in the block next to Hisua; no child toiling – be it in the agricultural fields, in the brick kilns or in the *dhabas* – is seen.

The fallout of the program has been that in the district headquarter, Nawada town, all the eating joints have increased the prices of their wares by about 30 to 50 percent. The argument of the owners is, now that all the child labor is out, they have had to employ people who are older and demand a wage, which is double than what was paid to the children they had previously hired. Who else would bear the brunt of this, but the customer?

Arjun Paswan, a 60 year-old, bachelor school teacher of the government school in Nawada town has made it his mission to bring up the former child laborers in his class to the desired level of proficiency. He works in the typical *gurukul* (traditional Indian schooling system, going back to the Vedic ages) mode; where he keeps some of these students in his home. He devotes all his attention to them in his spare time away from school. The boys in turn help him with the household chores and considers his abode as their own 'home'; going back home only during the vacations.

One of the prize pupils of Paswan, Suresh Majhi, belonging to the Musahar (a very low) caste, has been able to grasp a lot during the last six months. He can write quite well and has become well versed in the rudiments of literacy and numeracy.

His parents are migrant laborers and when the 'Happy Hisua' drive took place, they were away in neighbouring West Bengal, working as daily wage laborers. The owner of the *dhaba*, where Suresh used to work, put him off the job, kept him; fed and clothed him till Paswan took him in charge. In June 2003, Suresh was at home with his parents, who had come back in the meantime, enjoying his summer holidays for the first time in his nine-year-old life.

The whole of village Kaharia turned out to watch Suresh being interviewed. The villagers confirmed that no child went for work nowadays. There was a government school in the village, although they had a lot of complaints about it and the teachers. Said Maithili, a grandmother, whose grandson had been taken off from work and sent to school; "The DM threatened us with six-months imprisonment, if we let the children work." When asked whether she would send the child to work the minute this DM was transferred and a new one took her place; she answered in the negative, "The DM has said that this was a law now; any child being sent to work anytime would have the family elders landed in jail." Vijay Singh, one of the LEOs, confirmed that this was indeed the tact used in some instances. "During the campaign, we took care to find out about the economic condition of the children concerned. This lady's grandson did not work out of compulsion. They have some land. It's just the mindset some people have: what's the point in sending the child to school? They would be better off earning whatever they can from a very young age."

Azad and Rahul, two former child laborers, were caught hold of by Paswan, while they were in the vegetable market in Nawada town making purchases for home, who wanted to show off his pupils to visitors from Delhi. In the few months of 'not being laborers', both the boys had shed off their initial timidity towards urban strangers and could answer them looking straight into the eye. When asked to select some sweets to eat or take back home, Rahul promptly asked for some *rasgullas* (Indian sweetmeats made of cottage cheese). Azad followed suit. Eight-year-old Rahul used to work in that very eating joint, where they were being interviewed. He was the very hand behind the famous *rasgullas* of that shop. Yet, he never got to eat one all the while he worked there. Once, when he had tried sneaking one to his mouth, as a seven year old, he was brutally thrashed by the owner. It had always been his dream to sit on the benches, ordering *rasgullas* and eating as many as he wanted to his heart's content.

Ten-year-old Azad, on the other hand, working as a menial in the 'dipti's' (Deputy's) house, had no such dreams. Any sweet was a luxury for him. His sole kin in the world is his mother, who is the proclaimed lunatic of the town. While Azad worked in the 'dipti's' house, he and his mother lived in the outhouse. When Azad was taken out of work, they had no place to go to. The BDO of Hisua, in consultation with the DM, gave them a place in the '*rain basera*' (night shelter – run by the government for a nominal fee for out of state laborers) for free. Azad now attends the local government school, while his mother being entitled to the 'Widow's Pension' of Rs. 75 per month, ekes out a living with the proceeds.

Despite having no official 'free child labor' drives, the other blocks too have had an effect of it. Elsewhere, in Nawada town and in other blocks like Kadirganj and Warisaliganj, children are still seen selling vegetables in the market place or working in the teashops. While the sellers go on with their work when any district government official comes by; a marked difference is seen in the attitudes of the teashop owners. They hurriedly bundle the boys off from the shops with sharp instructions not to be around as long as the officials are present.

Although these boys still work, and perhaps will go on working till a drive takes place in their areas, when their employers would let them go off work; still, it is rather heartening to see that they have started to acknowledge, albeit indirectly, that child labor is ethically wrong.

### **Conclusion**

Bihar is a land of paradoxes. It is beset with all sorts of problems including having a sizable child labor population, both in the state and out of it; yet, it is the first state in the country to have a full-fledged 'Child Labor Commission,' which was formed in October 1999. This Commission functioned till October 2002 and was then discontinued due to a weird quirk. In the Gazette of the Child Labor Act of the Bihar Government, it was printed that the 'Commission should have a three-year term' instead of 'The Chairman and the Vice Chairman of the Commission should have a three-year term.'

However, the state government was keen on continuing with the Commission for various reasons. The foremost among them is that it becomes extremely embarrassing for the government to justify the ending of any commission related to women, children, dalits, human rights and the rest, abruptly. So the Commission was reinstated again in June 2003. The Commission is a statutory body, advisory in nature with no real powers. Reviewing all the acts and schemes related to children are the only aspects that come under its purview. Laments Satyanarayan Madan, the Vice Chairman of the Commission and an ex activist, "Despite wanting to surge ahead, my hands are tied. All I have been able to do in the last three years was listen to the problems the LEOs face in framing errant employers; bringing the problems of the National Child Labor Program in the knowledge of the government and help the state government frame 'government conduct rules' on domestic child labor." The state does not seem to be in the least serious regarding the Commission. It has no office, no infrastructure, and no facilities. It just seems to exist.

Again it was Bihar that has had the triumph of accomplishing the rare feat of having made a whole block child labor free within a record time. The target approach of the administration, which centered on pooling together the entire resources of the district, has yielded significant results. From a micro level – that is, from the village to the panchayat and further, to the block – Hisua is also indicative of a typical success story of the concept of the Bal Mitra Gram experiment.

The process, however, is not yet complete. The convergent approach of the program, though conceptually sound, poses the biggest challenge to the district administration for a proper carry through; as the ultimate success of the program, the retention of released child laborers away from work, lies solely on that.

Nonetheless, the path has been shown – of the kind of amazing results that can be achieved when the government and the civil society work together.

## Appendix 1

### **MUKTI KARWAN (March for Freedom) CAMPAIGN**

Child labor is immense in Bihar in terms of magnitude and complexity. This is primarily due to the economic backwardness of the state. The economy is based on agriculture, yet 75 percent of the cultivated land is owned by less than 20 percent of the population. The majority of the population is landless agricultural laborer and marginal farmers, with less than one acre or as in most cases, even much less than that. Land ownership and caste has a high correlation here. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes are dominant among the landless and marginal land owning families. Rich farmers are almost exclusively high castes. Caste and the status of poverty seem to go hand in hand in the state: an outcome of a historic discrimination that extends to the economic sphere.

As a result a majority of the migrant child laborers come from these families. It is estimated that more than three million children are languishing in bondage. The parents, especially the socially isolated Dalit community, afflicted by abject poverty and unemployment fall preys to the allurements of middlemen who make false promises to them of a golden future for their children, if they are allowed to work in various industries in other places. But no sooner than the child reaches the workplace, he knows that he is doomed. He is made to work 18/20 hours a day, with just two scanty meals a day. No recreation, no salary, no holiday – not even time for a bath.

This way, thousands of hapless children migrate every year to different organised and unorganized sectors. In the districts of Garhwa and Palamu in South Bihar and Kosi and Saharsa in North Bihar, the problem of migration has become a major cause behind social disintegration. Making children bonded has become one of the common economic practices in this area. The *Palayan Roko* (Stop Migration) campaign was envisaged to check this flow of children to the dark world of servitude.

The campaign started in 1997. With its two-year efforts, the project has been able to create a statewide awareness on the issue of mass migration of child labor from the state. The problem of the migrant child workers is now a point of discussion all over the state. Because of the constant effort and pressure of the campaign, the state government has appointed a 'State Child Labor Commission'. It has also constituted a 'Task Force to Stop Migration of Labor' priority to check migration of children for labor. The project has been able to make a dent in the system and now efforts are being made by the respective District Officials to provide employment to adults, particularly to stop migration of children at large to check the problem of child labor.

A mobile unit with campaign materials, audio-video equipments, activists and artists were deployed in rural areas. The unit performed street plays, folk music besides organising audio-video exhibitions related to child exploitation.

Emphasis was laid on preventing migration of children, improving the educational system, stepping up the pace of developmental process in coordination with governmental agencies, which also stimulated the concerned departments for taking up infrastructures like road, hospital, school, and the communication system to educate the masses on the adverse effects of child labor seeking their co-operation for the elimination. The mobile unit also gathered through surveys the socio-economic conditions of the parents besides identifying the magnitude of child labor which helped educate the villagers during the 2 day awareness camps conducted in each village in which children in servitude, their parents, teachers, panchayats office bearers, students, influential local personalities were involved.

A committee was formed with the help of panchayat members, local citizens, students and government officials, who prevented employment of children and instead facilitated them to join schools. Steps were also initiated to improve the economic status of the families so that the parents were explained the adverse effects of child labor. The activities and the

progress of the Migration committee monitored periodically and suitable remedial measures were taken to rectify flaws.

Various boys from the Bal Ashram, who are direct victims of poverty in these particular districts of Bihar and who have been kept in bondage in the carpet industry took part in the plays and skits. It was felt that these boys would make more of an appeal to the audience as what they said about the ills of child labor and the advantages of education (that they have now), came from the bottom of the boys' hearts.

The campaign has been restarted again after a period of two years, given the encouraging results from the fields and it is felt that it should continue for another two years, at least, concentrating its activities in 15 selected districts in Bihar with selected panchayats to understand the impact at the micro-level. Accordingly, a second phase of the 'campaign on wheels' has been initialized.

Here too, a well-trained, mobile, cultural team, consisting of mostly former bonded child laborers, who were trained in the Bal Ashram and the other Ashrams are engaged in various activities like street plays, skits, folksongs, picketing, *dharnaas* (demonstrations) and distribution of awareness generating materials. Moreover *Bal Mitra Grams* (Child Friendly Villages) are in the offing in 15 districts of Bihar, like Patna, Buxor, Muzaffarpur, Vaishali, Samastipur, Darbhanga, Saharsa, Khagadia, Madhepura, Araria, Kishanganj, Purnia, Katihar, Banka and Nawada.

(Source: <http://www.saccsweb.org.in> and SACCS Research Department)

## Appendix 2

### **The Shiksha Yatra (Campaign for Education)**

The massive number of uneducated children especially in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa (BIMARU – means ‘sick’ in Hindi), urgently need help. The BIMARU states account for around 70 percent of India’s non-literate population.

To wipe out the scars of illiteracy from India and especially from the BIMARU states, SACCS launched a unique campaign called the Shiksha Abhiyan Karwan.

The Shiksha Karwan aims to generate awareness among the people, to mobilise them on the issue of free, compulsory, meaningful and primary education. The Shiksha Abhiyan Karwan is the first campaign of its kind on a social issue like education in the history of India. Hence to create social awareness on the issue like education, four Shiksha Karwans were flagged off from Rajghat, in New Delhi on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 2000. The Karwan was undertaken in the BIMARU states as well, which have the highest illiteracy rate.

The two month long Karwan covered a distance of 8,000 kms moving through five states and 50 districts. It reached out to millions of people on a face-to-face basis.

Each of these Karwans with mobile van carried pamphlets, posters, leaflets and other educational materials. A cultural team consisting of released bonded child laborers and trained in street plays and theatre, folk media sensitized the masses through street plays and awareness songs.

The Mission of the campaign was ‘To build a National Movement Towards An Educated India.’

The states that the Shiksha Yatra covered were Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab.

The Shiksha Yatra was a huge success across the length and breadth of the country. It ignited a spirit of awareness, sparking of a nationwide consciousness on the issue of education. Logging a whopping 15,000 kms, covering 20 States and 200 Districts of this vast country, it culminated in New Delhi on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2001.

(Source: <http://www.saccsweb.org.in/>)