

SHANTHA SINHA

To most lay persons, the term “bonded labor” suggests little. But to Shantha Sinha, a social activist and professor at the University of Hyderabad in India, the term carries a heavy weight. It suggests children—children whose lives have been compromised by being deprived of their right to education and forced to work by employers against bonded debt incurred by their families.

In India, an annual contract for a child worker might bring 1,500 rupees (about U.S.\$34.00 in 2006), all of which goes to the parents. They will use the money to buy medicine or to repair a roof or to cover another child’s wedding expenses. If they fall short, they might take on a loan from the child’s employer and, to repay it, renew his or her contract for another year, and then another. In this way, bonded labor contracts for a child can drag on for six, twelve, or even twenty years. Employers are always in need of cheap labor. Children meet this need because they can be forced to work for paltry sums and long hours. Employers of children take advantage of a social tolerance for child labor based on the belief that it is inevitable. The problem is compounded by an insensitive school system that is lacking in both infrastructure and teachers and that fails to respect poor students and other first-generation learners.

Official estimates of the extent of child labor in India vary widely. They range from 20 million to as high as 114 million for children between the ages of five and fourteen. Although a majority of such children work as agricultural laborers, huge numbers are also employed in carpet weaving, glass making, match manufacturing, and any number of other hazardous industries. Andhra Pradesh, Shantha Sinha’s state, has the highest percentage of child labor in all of India. But thanks to her, today, tens of thousands of the state’s children have been liberated from labor contracts and are enrolled in school.

Shantha Sinha was born to a Brahmin family on January 7, 1950, in the Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh State in southeastern India. The elders in Sinha’s family, however, endeavored to make sure the younger generation did not feel entitled by this distinction. The family was not landed and, in terms of values, was very modern and liberal.

Shantha Sinha grew up in the same large family residence in Marredpally where she still lives today. She was the second of six children, and the only girl. (The family is high achieving. Today, her elder brother, Mohan, is a businessman; the second, Dr. Vidya Sagar, a professor of oncology; the third, Jayaram, a graduate of the Manila-based Asian Institute of Management and executive director of the Winrock International Regional Office. The final two, Vikram and Ranganath, are both accountants working with her father’s firm, the Anandam Company.)

Sinha’s paternal grandfather was Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya, a prominent Indian historian and political scientist who, as a teacher at Andhra and Bombay universities, inspired many students to become active nationalists. He was kind toward his grandchildren and made them all feel special. He also helped them to master mathematics, social studies, and Telugu, the language most commonly spoken in the state. Sinha was fortunate to have known him personally. She was thirty-one when he passed away in 1981.

Sinha's grandmother, Venkamma, whom all her grandchildren called Nayanamma, was a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and spun her own yarn, just as Gandhi had taught members of the middle and lower classes of India to do. Sinha's father, Mamidipudi Anandam, took a different path from his own father. After finishing a bachelor of arts degree at Andhra University, he took the accountancy exam and became a successful tax accountant with his own firm. He eventually entered public life, serving as a member of Andhra Pradesh's legislative council and, later, a member of the Rajya Sabha, the Parliament of India. Sinha's mother, Sita, did not go to college until after she was married. She was well read, had knowledge of literature and classics in English and Telugu, and was fully informed about public issues. She was a workaholic and an excellent homemaker, constantly taking in visiting relatives and Anandam's constituents as guests and making sure they felt at home and were well-fed. Anandam and his relatives lived in the Marredpally residence, which at one time sheltered as many as thirty people. So many guests kept coming and going that sharing was something natural for Sinha and other members of the family. At times, when there were four or five guests, one member of the family had to give up his or her sleeping space and quickly transfer elsewhere.

This arrangement was considered normal in the homes of old, traditional Indian families. Sinha did not resent the lack of privacy when she was growing up because it was the only life she ever knew. At home, conversations were mainly in Tamil and Telugu because Nellore is on the border of Tamil-speaking Madras. After the federal partitioning that accompanied Indian independence in 1948, however, Nellore became part of Telugu-speaking Andhra Pradesh.

Sinha and her family were nominally Hindu. Once a year, they would go on a pilgrimage to Tirupati, in the hills to the south. At home, they celebrated elaborate festivals but otherwise did not discuss religion. "Ritual is more a part of our culture and tradition than a part of religion," Sinha explains.

Keeping abreast of current events was an important tradition in the family. At nine in the evening, they listened to the radio news. Disagreements were common. Sinha recalls: "As children, we watched [the adults] discuss and debate and take stands within the family. It was like a chat show. We were listening quite intensely, so . . . we grew up knowing about public issues."

Sinha first attended Saint Ann's School, the best private school in the neighborhood for upper middle-class girls. Run by Italian Catholic nuns, it was an easy kilometer's walk from her home. Students there had to wear uniforms, with blue pinafores and white blouses. The nuns followed the state curriculum, using English as the primary medium of instruction. Hindi served as the secondary language, but Sinha admits that she did not learn it very well.

It was young Sinha's Telugu, not Hindi, that concerned the family. When her grandfather noticed that she was falling behind in her command of Telugu, he pulled her out of Saint Ann's and transferred her to Keyes High School, an institution located a little farther away. Like Saint Ann's, Keyes also used English as the primary language of instruction. But since the school served mainly students from the more common social classes, it also taught Telugu.

Sinha stayed at Keyes High School until the end of twelfth grade. She preferred Keyes to Saint Ann's because, although classes were larger at Keyes (with seventy to eighty girls in each class), she had friends from diverse backgrounds. The school did not require uniforms because not all the children's parents could afford them. Sinha says that she made more lifelong friendships there than in any other school she attended.

Sinha also learned a lot during her summer holidays in Nellore, where three of her brothers were studying. Annapoorna, her maternal grandmother, was a social worker who ran a hostel for

harijan girls—members of India’s stigmatized minority of “untouchables.” (The hostel was funded by local philanthropists and also by the national government and Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, or CARE.) These girls were the first in their families to go to school. At the hostel, they were trained in mainstream arts such as classical dancing and music, and reciting verses from the Bhagavad Gita. It was through interacting with these girls that Sinha first learned about the most deprived children.

One summer, during a visit to a temple at Tirupati with Annapoorna, Sinha witnessed something that impressed her greatly. Annapoorna had arranged with the temple authorities to have girls from the hostel serve as volunteers in the temple. This was significant because for generations, as *harijans*, they had not been allowed to enter temples. When they defied the rules, Sinha became aware of their newfound confidence. This moved her, and she regrets that she never discussed the event and its profound meaning with her grandmother before she passed away.

Annapoorna always thought her girls in the hostel were truly empowered. Thus, she never called her girls “unfortunate” because they were *harijan*. Indeed, the subject of caste was never discussed in the Nellore household. It would take some time before Sinha realized how powerful a role the caste system plays in Indian society.

From 1966 to 1969, Sinha completed a bachelor’s degree in history, English, and political science at Osmania University, a coeducational school in Hyderabad where she studied with male classmates for the first time. Being in university afforded her the opportunity to read writers of English fiction and to read English-language magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. She also watched movies in English, Hindi, and Telugu and listened to the Beatles.

Her social life centered on engaging with her classmates, a group of five other girls who were also undergraduate students but in different disciplines. They got together and learned about what was being taught in each other’s classes. If one girl’s teacher was particularly interesting, the others would attend that girl’s class. This widened their knowledge and modes of thinking. They spoke to each other in English and did not go out on dates. What they learned about relationships with men was from books and from watching other girls’ boyfriends.

Inspired by her grandfather Mamidipudi, Sinha pursued graduate studies in political science in the late sixties. Like many other cities, Hyderabad was caught up with radical student movements. Many of her classmates and peers were involved in student activism, including her future husband Ajoy Kumar. The debates among the student activists on inequality and social injustice and revolution caught her imagination. While she shared many values with Ajoy and his friends, she disagreed about the role of violence in achieving political change. She felt that violence only begets more violence and remained in the periphery of student activism. Sinha feared for the safety of her more radical classmates, whom she describes as brilliant, driven, and highly motivated.

In 1972, Sinha and two of her classmates decided to pursue doctoral degrees in Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), upon the suggestion of Professor Rasheeduddin Khan, one of her teachers and a member of parliament. Sinha’s father Anandam approved the idea because he was also a member of parliament at the time and kept a flat in Delhi. Sinha, however, chose to stay in a hostel, so that she could finally experience living away from home.

JNU was a highly politicized university and, for Sinha, a mind-opening experience. The atmosphere was dynamic and radical. In late-night political meetings, Stalinists debated Trotskyites, as eminent professors and politicians joined in.

Sinha's doctoral studies took on a new dimension when she and Ajoy decided to get married. She broke the news to her parents in October during a visit home. Neither parent was enthusiastic; given Ajoy's background, he might very well get into trouble with the police or, worse, go underground. Ajoy's father, Bejoy Kumar Sinha, was an associate of Bhaghat Singh, a nationalist who had thrown a bomb at the British and had been interned for life for his political affiliations. His mother, Sri Rajyam Sinha, had also been an ardent nationalist and was known as a fiery public speaker.

Despite her parents' reservations, Sinha married Ajoy on December 3, 1972, beginning a painful rift with her family that was healed soon after her daughter Sudha was born in 1973, while Shantha was still a student. Her second daughter Dipa was born in 1978. The following year, quite suddenly, Ajoy suffered convulsions and subsequently died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Afterwards, for a time, Shantha and the girls moved in with Ajoy's parents. But eventually they rejoined her large family in Marredpally.

In 1981, Mamidipudi died, leaving an estate of some U.S.\$4,545.00 (Rp. 200,000). His ten children decided to set up a foundation bearing his name: the Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation, or MV Foundation. As founding trustees, Anandam became the foundation's chair and managing trustee; Sinha, its secretary; and her brother Vikram, its treasurer. They and other trustees agreed that, initially, the MV Foundation would produce small, readable monographs on current issues (economic development, agrarian reform, India's international debt) and provide scholarships to poor students pursuing higher education in centers of excellence.

Meanwhile, Sinha was teaching at the University of Hyderabad. Not wholly satisfied with classroom teaching, she began to look for ways to pursue her interest in working-class people and their rights. This led her to propose a project to the government of India in connection with a program called Shramik Vidyapeet, or "workers' education." Her proposal focused on workers' education for villagers. "There was a friend of mine, Gita Ramaswamy," she says, "who was working in the villages . . . on the release of bonded laborers. I felt that maybe I could do that as a workers' education program in a different area."

Sinha chose the villages of Uppal Mandal, where she began organizing women agricultural workers for minimum wages. The law set the minimum wage at nine rupees and fifty paise a day (about U.S.\$0.22), but the employers of these women paid them only five rupees (about U.S.\$0.11) a day. Sinha urged the women to go on strike. Instead, they devised a labor action designed to mobilize moral force behind their demands. For twenty days, they continued to work but refused to accept any wages. This impressed Sinha. "That was the first lesson I learned from the women. They needed those five rupees. But they said no, we will not [take them]. When that happened, I knew I had a lot more to learn."

Ordinarily, employers in a situation like this would bribe the labor officials to decide the dispute in their favor. But the officials were so humbled by these women that they resolved the issue in the favor of women workers.

In Uppal Mandal, Sinha also learned that 6 to 7 percent of the *harijan* community consisted of bonded laborers, i.e., workers who were bonded by debt to their employers or landlords and therefore not free to leave or change employment. Adult bonded laborers normally began working at six in the morning and worked until ten or eleven in the evening. They could be summoned by their landlord at any time and suffered insults and abuses daily. In fact, the government of India had banned bonded labor in 1976 with the Bonded Labor System Abolition Act, which also cancelled the debts of bonded workers. Despite the law, however, bonded labor

was still common. Sinha began helping landless poor workers in Uppal Mandal to take advantage of the Act.

Whereas the government had livelihood programs for rehabilitating adults released from bonded labor, it had nothing similar for children. Yet, four out of every ten bonded laborers were children. Why was so little attention devoted to them? On reflection, Sinha realized it was because children were simply not thought of as “workers.”

Confronting egregious cases of child-labor abuse in Uppal Mandal, Sinha decided to act. She and her Shramik Vidyapeet colleagues rescued a couple of children from bondage. For the next few months they sheltered them in the university greenhouse, waiting for tensions to ease in the village from which they had been taken. No provisions had been made for the children in advance. There was not even a light in the greenhouse. But Sinha managed to arrange regular meals for the children and visited them daily. Soon, the smaller ones were learning gardening skills and the older ones, carpentry and plumbing—from contractors currently carrying out construction projects on campus. From these improvised beginnings at Hyderabad University grew a successful literacy program for rescued child workers. One of the original group of rescued children eventually became a clerk (secretary) at the university.

In 1989, Sinha completed her work with Shramik Vidyapeet and soon rejoined her department to teach political science. Meanwhile, she felt that a more intensive program was needed for the rescue and rehabilitation of child laborers. She decided to bring the problem to the family MV Foundation. The foundation’s trustees agreed to take up the cause of the abolition of child labor and a child’s right to education. They established a trust to carry forward Sinha’s program outside of Shramik Vidyapeet. To avoid confusion and conflict, the MV Foundation set up its program in villages where Shramik Vidyapeet was not present. It chose as its pilot area the Ranga Reddy District, an hour’s drive from the university. Semi-arid and known for dry-field agriculture, the district consists of villages where earthen-floor houses are made from mud, fiber, and grass.

The district had many disadvantages. Although most of its population was poor, it had never been identified for a rural assistance program. Those who could afford to migrate to Hyderabad had already done so. Having no great rivers, it was completely dependent on rainwater. The water it had from small streams and a lake provided not for its own needs but for nearby Hyderabad. Moreover, since the district had once been part of a princely state and had not come directly under direct British rule, its people had not been swept up into the independence movement or into later manifestations of mass politics, including agitations by the Left. Hence, it was thoroughly unpoliticized. (In one sense, this was an advantage for the MV Foundation: Ranga Reddy’s inhabitants did not have to unlearn any set ideas.)

As part of her preparations for the new program, Sinha recalled Gandhi’s teachings and her own experiences with Shramik Vidyapeet. She felt that the programs of the MV Foundation should not in any way serve to reinforce caste identities or caste solidarity. Instead, they should focus on children and their basic rights, and they would emphasize that, since these rights are universal, everyone must take part in the struggle to uphold them.

The MV Foundation’s charter spelled out a nonnegotiable five-point strategy:

1. All children must attend formal, full-time day schools.
2. Any child out of school is, by definition, a child laborer.
3. All work is hazardous to the overall growth and development of a child.
4. There should be a total ban on child labor.

5. Any justification for perpetuating child labor must be condemned.

The foundation began its work in Ranga Reddy with only five staff members, who doubled as activist teachers. In the district, they began identifying allies and stirring up interest, moving from village to village to raise awareness and to begin mobilizing local support for community action. At the same time, Sinha and her colleagues took note of cases of child labor in Ranga Reddy as potential targets for intervention.

Having done so, they began to act. The first group of liberated children numbered thirty. Having rescued the children, Sinha and her team sheltered them and began teaching them to read and write. Not one of them had ever been to school. The local government schools were not prepared to take in these overaged and illiterate children; they begged off by saying that the official period for school registration had long passed. This dilemma led to the MV Foundation's first bridge camp, at which children released from labor were provided basic instruction in anticipation of their later qualifying to join real schools. Young volunteers came forward to staff the camp. This became the foundation's working model. Sinha and the MV Foundation staff then began adapting the model village by village as they expanded the scope of their operations in the district. By the end of 1991, the foundation was active in five villages. By 1993, with support from the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), it had expanded to nearly forty. During these pioneering years, Sinha learned what to anticipate as she and her team entered new villages and refined the foundation's approach.

Before formally entering a village, the foundation conducted a survey of out-of-school children and formed a committee to prepare for intervention. The committee then held discussions on the need to withdraw children from the labor force and identified the people who would be most instrumental in the process, including village elders, elected officials, youth, and teachers. These discussions led to a plan of action.

Bridge camps were the key to Sinha's successful approach. Here, the rescued children were provided a safe environment in which to prepare for regular school. Before beginning classes, the foundation identified who among the children could go more or less directly to public school and who would require a longer process. In general, those aged eight to eleven were put through an accelerated bridge program so that they could enter normal school as quickly as possible. Older children, aged twelve to fourteen, usually went through a course of twelve to eighteen months. Experience quickly revealed that bridge programs for girls needed to be more elaborate, not because girls are slow learners but because it takes more time for them and their parents to adjust to the idea of their going to school at all.

Instruction was disciplined and rigorous in the camps but also joyful. Lessons were designed to hold a child's interest through ample use of stories, songs, proverbs, and riddles. Youth volunteers served as teachers, providing instruction for as long as six hours a day and living in the camps with the children, sharing the same quarters and mentoring them around the clock. Beating the children was wholly taboo and scolding was frowned upon. Each night, the teachers met as a team to share what they have learned from the children and to plan for the next day. As a form of peer learning, they also discussed the difficulties they encountered in their work.

Each bridge camp had a leader who looked after the camp's academic concerns and managed its provisions. This leader was supported by twelve to fifteen volunteers and other camp staff, including people who did the cooking, the washing, and the cleaning of the dining room.

During the camp, each child was asked to talk about himself or herself in front of the class. What the child said was written on the board, typed, copied, and then distributed the following morning to all the other children. The material was given a heading “authored by,” and students were invited to ask questions or give their reactions. This learning method was devised by the youth volunteers and was particularly effective for children who had been objects of abuse—making them the center of attention. Indeed children became the authors of their own text books and education materials.

In the bridge camps, children learned to be responsible and to take the initiative. They were required to perform chores and assigned to committees charged with responsibility for security, food, health, or supplies. They were taught to monitor items such as books, food, and even toothpaste and to inform the supplies committee which items were in short supply. The children also learned to look after each other and to be aware of who was unhappy or adjusting badly. In meetings, they discussed which classes were boring or too difficult and what they wanted and needed. After one such meeting, telephones were installed in the camps to enable children and their parents to phone each other.

Sinha quickly observed how the bridge camp experience transformed young people. “When they came,” she says, “they were quite unsure of themselves. By the time the camp was over, they were confident and vocal, very articulate. And they asked questions. They were so sure of what they wanted to do and where they wanted to go.”

There was also a change in the attitude of parents whose children passed through the bridge program. Before, says Sinha, the parents treated their children as if these were employees, not children. But “when [the parents] began to discover their children reading, writing, and playing, they discovered the parenthood in themselves. When the child becomes a child,” she says, “the parent becomes a parent.”

Before being exposed to the bridge camps, many parents also found it easier to discipline their children than to show them affection. They rarely complemented them. Afterwards, Sinha says, “When a mother comes to see her child, she doesn’t want us to know she has brought [a gift] for them. She hides it. It is always nice to see that moment. It is so beautiful, she is discovering that she can *give*, and she is so shy.”

For the children’s part, being in the bridge camp helped them learn to respect their parents and to be aware of how hard they had to work to support them and send them to school, even selling precious livestock to do so. This motivated the children to excel in their studies, which in turn strengthened the bond between them and their parents.

Sinha and her co-workers did not seek to establish an alternative educational system but rather to strengthen and reinforce the existing one. Hence, when young people completed the bridge program, the foundation facilitated their matriculation in government schools and continued to support them and to monitor their progress.

After matriculating at regular schools, many bridge-camp graduates shifted from living in MV Foundation camps to government-provided “welfare hostels,” dormitories provided to poor children so that they can attend schools at a distance from their homes (and to those who cannot live at home for other reasons). Each hostel was run by a warden. Sinha and her colleagues at the foundation realized that living conditions in the hostels were far from ideal, but they encouraged the children to endure the temporary discomfort as a stepping-stone to a better life later on.

As the MV Foundation expanded, it set up parent-teacher associations to provide local support and vigilance for the hostels. It encouraged the parents, as well as youth activists and the children themselves, to challenge authority and to make sure that resources provided for the

hostels actually reached them and were not siphoned off by corrupt officials. Sinha refused to accept the excuse that corruption was simply “part of the system.” To officials who said that petty corruption could not be eliminated, she answered, “It *can* be done because we are here [to challenge it]; because the community is ready [to challenge it]; and because the youth are ready [to challenge it]. You do your job, we do ours.” The children were also instructed discreetly to keep diaries about the operations of their hostels. These were later submitted to the Anti-Corruption Bureau, to help weed out corrupt wardens.

As a result of these efforts, Sinha says that government hostels in Ranga Reddy (and other areas where the MV Foundation became active) began performing better, with supplies and materials arriving on time and hostel gardens being kept clean. This made the children happier and even the wardens seemed to enjoy their work more.

From the beginning, working with parents has been a basic doctrine of the MV Foundation. R. Venkat Reddy, a former member of the Revolutionary Students Union and now a project coordinator of Sinha’s foundation, explains:

At that time (early 1990s) we probably believed in the top-down approach. But gradually, through a process of continuous dialogue and discussion at various levels, new strategies and leadership emerged on their own. I think the best validation of our approach is when the parents themselves assert that what we are suggesting to them is good for their children. That’s the benchmark by which we test ourselves.

Sinha says the tragedy of the child labor situation in India lies in the presumption that every child laborer must work because a family’s survival is at stake. “This is the most insidious aspect of the argument and it is not true,” she says. “If it were true, then in every village the poorest children would drop out from school first and enter the labor market.” But India’s villages are full of examples of very poor families with children in school, while children of their relatively better-off counterparts are working.

Most parents will go to any length to make sure their children can go to school, but not all. “It is not the economic situation but tradition and the ignorance of illiterate parents and the lack of access to alternatives . . . that govern the decision to send a child to work or to school,” Sinha says. Hence, one goal of the MV Foundation is to keep children from becoming bonded workers in the first place, by preventing the recruitment of children and by working with parents so that no children will be available to be recruited. Sinha’s foundation leads parents to realize that the decision to send a child to school instead of to work is a revolutionary step.

For generations, poor parents in India have been led to believe that it is best to initiate their children into work at the earliest age possible. Education was never part of their daily lives. For destitute families, schools exist in an alternative social world. Simply enrolling a child involves producing a birth certificate and a caste certificate and purchasing schoolbooks and proper clothing. For the very poor, these are daunting barriers. Moreover, teachers themselves are a mystery, as is homework and the other demands that teachers make on students. The fact that some teachers are ill-trained and that some behave irrationally does not help matters. As a result, even when poor parents do send their children to school, many pressures conspire to lead them back to work.

A complicating factor is the way child labor is officially defined. Sinha points out that the law in India and in many other countries does not recognize children working in agriculture as

workers at all. It thus excludes children working for their rural families at home, carrying siblings, fetching water, gathering fuelwood, and doing other farm chores. This is why the foundation emphasizes that “*All* work is hazardous to the overall growth and development of a child.”

Sinha says child labor and illiteracy are examples of the poor not being heard because they are not considered important by the rest of society. The poor lack a voice because they have no access to the right political parties and cannot articulate their demands effectively. Sinha believes this is an entitlement denied the poor. “We need to question and challenge such positions favoring the status quo,” she says, and to build a consensus around the concept that “every child should be in school.”

Sinha believes that when more children begin to enroll in a school, the community’s stake in the school goes up. This leads to greater involvement by parents in school affairs, which in turn leads to an improvement in the quality of instruction and in the school’s response to other needs of children. As this happens, the community’s stake rises again. In the poverty-stricken areas where the MV Foundation works, a community’s commitment to its schools rises in direct proportion to its commitment to reject child labor. Indeed, creating this virtuous cycle is Sinha’s goal.

Her approach belies the traditional wisdom that a child should not waste time learning useless things in school and instead should be initiated into the family trade as early as possible. This philosophy deprives a child the right to choose his or her own future. In the same vein, the MV Foundation rejects vocational education for poor children, believing that this is only a euphemism for keeping children in the labor market.

Evidence shows that, contrary to popular belief, a child learns any given skill faster after the age of twelve to fourteen, having achieved a certain proficiency in basic studies. Sinha says society should not be divided into those who can afford to wait for their children to attend school and those who need to put their children to work as soon as possible.

At the core of the MV Foundation program are youth organizations, some of which were already in existence before the foundation came along. In the past, says Sinha, the main activity of these groups was to raise the flag on Independence Day. When the foundation came in, it identified leaders among these youth organizations. Some of them became members of its program staff.

The youth volunteers of MV Foundation are responsible for ascertaining the situation of children in a village, identifying those in bonded labor or other child-labor circumstances, and paving the way for the foundation’s intervention by identifying potential opponents as well as allies among local parents, teachers, and employers. Having local allies is critical in negotiating with offending employers of bonded children, who are naturally defensive about their actions and feel threatened by Sinha’s activists.

The MV Foundation trains its volunteers in various methods of handling uncooperative employers. Sometimes it has to call a recalcitrant employer’s bluff. But wherever possible, it avoids confrontation because it does not want confrontational situations to distract it from its main goal, which is to put an end to child labor. The foundation’s main tool is moral persuasion articulated through village-level committees. It also helps employers find alternatives to using child workers and honors the employers publicly when they abandon the practice.

One of the foundation’s recurrent concerns is getting long-term funding for the program’s operations. Grants have been difficult to obtain. As a result, the MV Foundation has had to dip into its trust fund corpus. The central government’s Ministries of Labor and Education and the

World Bank's program on poverty have provided funds to help expand the program but not enough to sustain it. In fact, the foundation relies heavily on its youth volunteers, who have been willing to work for very low wages and sometimes without pay at all.

The MV Foundation does not compete with government, but it does not act in isolation either. As Sinha explains, "We need access to government and institutional support. Only then we shall know the inadequacies in the system that can be addressed." An example is the problem of retention. This is a serious issue because some parents say their children do not seem to be learning, even if they are already going to school. Research done by the foundation shows one of the reasons why: in some schools, the student-teacher ratio is as high as 300:1.

Still, the MV Foundation does not build any parallel structures but seeks to improve existing ones provided by government and the community. Apart from the short-term bridge education camps, which are eventually disbanded, there is no institution-building in the physical sense. The camps themselves are conducted in government schools and hostels.

The MV Foundation has noted that the government's reach is limited by the specific parameters of its programs. In children's education, for example, all government programs stop at the schools. Everything else—all the critical processes that occur in the community and the family—is beyond government purview. Fortunately, the MV Foundation's work with government has been largely satisfactory. For one thing, the foundation convinced the local education department to issue a circular allowing children to be admitted to schools anytime during the school year. (A remaining goal is to have schools remain open during the farming season, so that children will not be made to work in the fields.) For another, the foundation convinced the government school's education committees to allow youth volunteers to serve as regular teachers. Even if these volunteers are not formally qualified, they help solve the problem of an acute shortage of classroom teachers. The foundation's personnel have also helped to staff beleaguered schools by registering students, updating files, and ensuring that important information reaches teachers, parents, and students.

The MV Foundation marked a milestone when, in 1997, it convinced the local government to disband the state of Andhra Pradesh's Non-Formal Education (NFE) system, which had justified child labor. Under NFE, government simply assumed that children were needed to work. NFE teaching centers were run so that they did not interfere with the work schedule of the children. Since then, the foundation has trained nineteen thousand former NFE staff members to redefine their work as child activists, ensuring that children go to regular school. Following MV Foundation's initiative in Andhra Pradesh, the national NFE system was scrapped in 2002.

The MV Foundation also worked closely with *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, a government program that universalizes education by emphasizing formal school rather than alternate schools that compromise children's rights. Such programs have greatly increased the impact of Sinha's work. She says, "It took some years [for the MV Foundation] to bring thirty thousand children to school; yet within one summer [the government] brought one lakh [one hundred thousand] children to school." One sign of the foundation's influence on government policy is the transfer of the child labor issue from the purview of the department of labor to the department of education.

The government's district primary education program, which is also funded by the World Bank, has adopted a policy of seeking to abolish child labor through the universalization of education. For this purpose, the MV Foundation trained 2,500 teachers dedicated to the liberation of children. These teachers, through their unions, now work with their fellow teachers not only

within Ranga Reddy but in the entire Andhra Pradesh state. It helped that the project director for the district primary education program was Nagarjuna, a cousin of Sinha's.

The real success of the MV Foundation's cooperation with government is with the teachers. In the beginning, teachers were reluctant to associate themselves with the foundation's program and viewed it with suspicion. But after constant engagement with the community and attending a series of workshops focusing on the teacher's role in the context of abolishing child labor, they came to see themselves as protectors of the child's right not to work. This has greatly increased the teachers' self-esteem and, in many instances, motivated them to work hard at developing new teaching techniques for former child laborers. The success of these techniques has empowered the teachers and led them to identify totally with the program. Some 1,500 of them have become members of Bala Kaarmika Vimochana Vedika (BKVV), a teachers' forum that advocates the elimination of child labor through education.

In 2001, the foundation expanded its operations to include other agendas. Among these were natural resource management, the organization of women into labor cooperatives, protection of the environment, and ending child marriages. The last issue is particularly sensitive because many of the girls going to school are under threat of being married off by their families. These girls are between the ages of twelve and fourteen.

Sinha cites the case of Indira, a girl who defied no less than seven engagements. When Indira found out that she was to be engaged an eighth time, without telling anyone, she walked twenty kilometers to the nearest MV Foundation bridge camp and refused to return home. Before Indira, the foundation deliberately did not encourage girls to run away from home as it felt that the girls would always need a family base. But Indira showed that girls like her needed protection and, as a result of the foundation's new policy of encouraging girls to protest against their marriages even in defiance of their own family, at least six thousand other girls have followed her example and gone to school instead of getting married. The foundation has launched campaigns and held marches and rallies against child marriage. It has also organized child protection committees in villages to make people more aware of the consequences of child marriage. As a result, many young men have sworn oaths that they will not marry underaged girls.

Beginning in September 2002, a program based on the MV Foundation model was pilot-tested in Assam, in northeast India. The Assam program is integrated with the local government's District Primary Education Program (DPEP) and is implemented in nine districts, each having about forty thousand child laborers. Similar MV Foundation-inspired programs have been launched in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan, and the cities of Kolkata and Mumbai.

The MV Foundation has also trained officials of almost every education department in the country and has partnered with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for the elimination of child labor through social mobilization.

As a matter of policy, the foundation extends consultancy and guidance services only to organizations and agencies that commit themselves to the five-point nonnegotiable strategy mentioned in the foundation's charter. Nongovernmental organizations in other parts of India that have completely replicated the foundation's strategy include Child in Need Institute (CINI)-Asha in Kolkata and People's Rural Education Movement (PREM) in Orissa. Others, such as Pratham in Mumbai, Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan, and the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board in Chennai, have replicated parts of Sinha's program.

By 1999, the MV Foundation was active in five hundred villages in Ranga Reddy; by 2003, it was in nearly 4,500 villages. By this time, nearly 250,000 children, nearly half of them girls, had passed through the foundation's bridge camps and entered regular schools. Sinha's programs had also brought about the elimination of 23,000 night schools in the region.

Sinha reports further:

When we began working, the common question that had to be answered was why children are in work. Now, nobody asks that question in Andhra Pradesh, especially in the education department and among NGOs working on child rights. The question now is how to get them into schools. This is a major difference.

Sinha believes that because of the momentum of the program in Andhra Pradesh, donor agencies will find it difficult to give money to night schools or to insist that children must work because they are poor.

Key to the foundation's success is close monitoring, especially of children newly withdrawn from work and placed in regular schools. An example is a volunteer who noticed a sudden drop in the number of scheduled caste children attending school. He could not find them at home either. He discovered that a new kind of commercial farming had entered the area. Promoted by multinational seed companies, it leased land at throwaway prices to grow lucrative hybrid cotton seed. The process is labor-intensive and requires workers to handle toxic pesticides. To get cheap labor, the companies induced the poor parents of girl children with fat loan advances and other allurements, telling them that only pre-pubescent girls could do the work. In the late 1990s, the MV Foundation organized a concerted campaign against this type of farming.

Sinha is happy that a campaign in Europe, particularly in Ireland and Germany, called "Stop Child Labor, School is the Best Place for Work" has been launched in schools in support of abolition of child labor as a nonnegotiable agenda. European donor agencies such as Netherlands-based HIVOS (Dutch acronym for Humanist Institute of Development Cooperation), Deutsche Welthungerhilfe (DWHH) of Germany, and Concern Worldwide (known as Concern) of Ireland have drawn strength from the success and advocacy of the MV Foundation to lobby for the principle that "a child out of school is a laborer."

For her achievements, Sinha received the Padmashri and the Albert Shanker International Educational Award in 1998, and became a U.S. International Fellow and a Louis Marchesi Fellow of the Round Table India Foundation.

Because there is a Shantha Sinha, many children—former child laborers—have been able to go to school. Some have become lorry drivers and security guards, postal workers, school teachers and nurses, and even engineers and doctors. This is now happening all over India—ample testimony to the radical proposition that lies behind Shantha Sinha's life's work: Every child has the potential to become a full human being, and also the right.

Vicente G. Tirol

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