

## **Giving Wing to Children's Dreams**

### **Swapna MAJUMDAR (India)**

Every morning when 19 year old Sunila Hazda sets off to work, she is not sure what time she will return home. Her work as a defender of child rights or Bal Bandhu requires her to traverse through dense forests and cross steep hills. She also must be prepared to negotiate snakes and other animals as she walks from village to village in this remote Naxal<sup>i</sup> affected area, the district Jamui, Bihar, India.

Although she has been born and brought up in this Santhal (tribal) dominated panchayat, the lack of roads and electricity makes her unsure at times. However, there is one thing that the small built Sunila is sure about. She will stop at nothing to get every child to where she belongs—the school.

Having gone through a long and difficult struggle to study, Sunila, the daughter of woodcutter, does not want others to face the same obstacles. Her parents sold firewood to garner resources for her education and allowed her to stay in a hostel 110 kilometers away to pursue her dreams. “If I had not studied, I, too, would have been selling firewood. Education has given me a job and an identity,” she says.

Proud as she is to be known as the first girl in her Santhal community to reach Class 11, Sunila is equally keen to help other children of the community get their right to education. It was this zeal that led to her being chosen as a Bal Bandhu or friend of the child under the government's recently launched Bal Bandhu program.

Introduced in December 2010 by the National Commission for Protection of Children (NCPCC), after getting the nod by the Prime Minister's office, the Bal Bandhu program aims to protect children's rights in areas of civil unrest with the help of Bal Bandhus or child defenders chosen from the community. This is a three year program being piloted in 10 districts in nine states impacted by civil unrest. In Bihar, the conflict affected district of Jamui has been chosen. Here, the program is being piloted in the Khaira block.

As a Bal Bandhu, Sunila is a model leader of her community not just because she is slowly and steadily mobilizing the community to take responsibility of upholding the rights of their children but also because she has managed to convince them to send their children to schools.

Even parents, who considered sending their children to school a waste of time, said they were forced to change their minds when they found Sunila willing to extend every support to facilitate their child's education. Sonu's mother had sent her 11 year old son to work in the fields after the death of her husband. She considered his being employed

a better utilization of time than studying even though Sonu wanted to go to school.

When Sunila learnt about Sonu's desire to study, she convinced his mother that education alone could give him the opportunity to lead a better life. Also, the added advantage was that she would not have to spend any money on his education as schooling was compulsory and free under the new Right to Education Act. Had not Sunila helped him, Sonu would have never known that it was his right to go to school.

What makes Sunila a future leader for the next generation is her ability to fight all odds and inspire her. Difficult in terrain and sensitive in environment, Khaira block presented many challenges. Its sharing borders with neighboring state of Jharkhand, also stricken by Naxal activities, only added to the existing sense of insecurity prevalent in the block. Before the Bal Bandhu program was launched, Jamui witnessed were several incidents of violence involving the Naxals and the police.

In fact, the lives of 553 students enrolled in the middle school in this block came to a standstill in March 2011 when their school was targeted by the Naxals. A big part of the school was destroyed by a bomb planted by the Naxals to prevent the government from housing a battalion of the central reserve police force (CRPF) in the school premises.



The school destroyed by Naxals in Jamui

In these far from normal circumstances, motivating people to cast aside their fears and participate in protecting child rights is a difficult task. It has taken special effort and commitment to build a partnership between the people and the state to restore confidence in government institutions and achieve the objectives of the Bal Bandhu program.

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<sup>i</sup> Naxals are considered far-left radical communists, supportive of Maoist political sentiment and ideology.