

"Mobilized Villagers reclaim school property from Extortionist, School of Girls Built"

Case Study Chiniot

Peepal Bhutta is a village in Lalyan Tehsil of district Chiniot. ASER 2011 results revealed that 95% girls of school going age are out of school in this village. ASER team along with AEO Ms. Tahira Sultana visited the village to investigate the reasons behind such a huge number of out of school girls. This was the beginning of a journey which led to an awakening among the community and led to its participation in rebuilding a girls' school whose land had been previously confiscated by extortionists.

The only government primary school for girls in Village Peepal Bhutta was rather just a piece of land with no building or a boundary wall or any basic facilities. This was because the government had allocated land for the construction of the school years ago but before any building could be built, the land was confiscated by a local landlord and was maintained as a facility for housing his and his tenant's cattle. Due to lack of a functioning school for girls, a neighbor Mr. Zafar volunteered to let the community use his house to hold classes. This was not a formal school but still 54 girls were enrolled under the supervision of only one government paid teacher Ms. Shehnaz. When ASER Team met her she said that the makeshift school had been running in the same condition for last 17 years. Holding classes in someone's house is the main reason why many parents are reluctant to send their daughters to this makeshift school, and this is causing massive numbers of out of schools girls in the village. Ms. Shehnaz said that because there is no school building so she is compelled to hold classes in Mr. Zafar's house. No one in the village is really bothered about girls education and hence, no one has ever fought the extortionist to resume the school's land.

Taking all these things into consideration, ASER team took the initiative to resolve this issue for the sake of the community. Initially community meetings were held to mobilize the community in order to make it realize about the importance of educating girls. Once the community members understood the advantages of education for females that is when we asked them why was it that the community hadn't done anything about the school land in so many years. Many community members were left dumbfounded on this. But fortunately, the community got sensitized about its rights and became motivated to pursue the matter of reclaiming the confiscated land. Soon after the meetings community members went to the political elders of the locality and plead their case. The political elders exerted considerable pressure onto the local landlord and within a week or so the community was able to successfully reclaim the school land back. The community members also went ahead and, on self-help basis, were able to raise Rs. 200,000 for the construction of a room on the emptied land. Soon after, under Assistant Commissioner Tehsil Lalyan's supervision, the room construction began.

A month later when ASER Team returned to the village to conduct an ASER baithak in the village, we found out that the room construction was not being monitored properly which was causing misuse of funds. ASER Team and some community members, along with the ASER coalition "Citizen's Voice" in Chiniot got together and took this matter to DCO Chiniot Dr. Irshad Ahmed's. On DCO's orders, AC

Lalyan was directed to cooperate with ASER team and get the room constructed in a proper auditable manner.

While the construction of the room was on-going, the community realized that a non formal center being run by NFPBE which was closed due to lack of students could be made into a school for girls for the time being. This might encourage some girls to come as opposed to coming to some ones house. So this building was converted into a school and a teacher of Literacy Center Ms.Nazia (who was already paid by the government despite her center being closed) was asked to teach at the temporary school with Ms. Shehnaz.

Today, the room on the government land is constructed. AEO Barhana Markaz Ms. Tahira Sultana has promised to provide an extra teacher for the school in the coming academic year and another formal teacher has been promised during next phase of recruitment of teachers by EDO Education Mahr Ashraf Haral. DCO Chiniot has promised to provide budget for provision of facilities like water and toilets in next district budget. Finally, Peepal Butta will have a full functional school of its own for girls. We are hopeful that girls will now enroll in school and dream of free and quality education for all will soon be realized.