

# Village Learning Centres in Uttarakhand



Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan  
Almora

Contact:

Dr Lalit Pande

Director

Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan(USNPSS)

Uttarakhand Environment Education Centre

Jakhan Devi, Mall Road

Almora-263601

Email: [an.lalit@gmail.com](mailto:an.lalit@gmail.com)

Phone: 05962-234430

FAX: 05962-231100

This article has been written by Anuradha Pande (March 2015), with inputs from Dr M.G. Jackson, Dr B.K. Joshi, Dr Lalit Pande, Kamal Joshi, Suresh Bisht and D. S. Latwal.

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## Summary

*This paper outlines an approach to personal and social transformation in rural areas. Recently the concept of transformation has attracted a great deal of attention worldwide, both in the education and development sector. Having successfully reformed Government policies on environment education in schools and on early childhood care and education in Uttarakhand, USNPSS has now visualized a new programme of “village learning centres” to facilitate transformative learning.*

*While outlining the activities carried out in centres, the paper briefly traces the evolution of the conceptual framework for designing the programme. A snapshot of transformation that may occur both at personal and social levels is provided. The outcome is seen in terms of resilient communities which can respond positively to the rapid exogenous changes, both environmental and economic, influencing the villages. Suitable livelihood opportunities responding to the aspirations of the young, particularly girls, are also envisaged.*

## **Introduction**

This programme seeks to address the growing demands for learning facilities that could integrate and accommodate shared needs and aspirations of rural communities in the hills of Uttarakhand. The programme is situated within the wider context of participatory education and development discourse that Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan (USNPSS) has nurtured for the last two and a half decades in villages of the state of Uttarakhand. The organization has worked both with government schools and informal centres with students in elementary stages of schooling and with adolescents and youth. Educational activities have focused on overall development of children in rural settings. In addition, programmes run with the adult women's groups have nurtured, challenged and transformed the socio-cultural structures and gender-relations within and between communities.

Though the unique feature of the educational approach adopted by USNPSS has been the creation of and nurturing connections between government schools, informal learning centres and organized activities of women's groups, it is only now after two decades of working with communities that a clear visualization of community learning centres, both in theory and practice, has emerged. At their best in the past, activities had established several links between children and adult learning but different needs of these groups had led to evolution of different programmes. Children learnt in balwadis (3-6 years), in the evening centres (6-11 years) and studied environmental education in schools (11-14 years). They were also attending computer literacy centres and the village libraries. Adults formed groups (women's groups, youth groups and groups of adolescent girls) to take up development activities with education as the guiding principle. For example, women nurtured solidarity, planned and implemented projects on protection, conservation of natural resources, took action against alcoholism and gambling among men, nurtured ideas of hygiene at home and in the village, installed

sanitation facilities taking all decisions in village meetings, sent their girls to schools, talked about their nutrition, health issues and attended women's literacy centres. In some villages, livelihood related activities such as fish farming, fruit and vegetable cultivation, fruit processing etc. were taken up by the youth. Long-term engagement in such activities has not only enabled an environment for developing gender-sensitive communities but also provided insights and experience to sustain initiatives that women thought were necessary for achieving gender and caste equality in the region.

The programme acknowledges the fact that in a village each individual is responsible for shaping the community. The community evolves and changes with time as do the responsibilities that were traditionally handed down from one generation to the next. However, it is for the first time in the history of remote hill villages in Uttarakhand that the traditional order is threatened by the entry of open market forces, construction of roads and provision of communication facilities. As the village residents respond to these changes a sense of confusion prevails. In the changing social order, community expressions emerge as experiences of uncertainty and bewilderment. The following two cases would illustrate the sense of perplexity that communities have been struggling with.

(i) Although the state of Uttarakhand exhibits high enrolment, retention and low dropout rates in elementary stages of schooling, the local residents, especially in rural hill areas, are not only challenging the quality of education but also questioning the services offered across all stages of schooling. It is an observed fact that the village residents are migrating to nearby towns and cities to provide "good education" to their children by enrolling them into private schools. As enrolment rates in government primary schools fall, the recent efforts are directed towards closing down those facilities that have less than a certain number of children enrolled and attending.

This dilemmatic response to formal schooling illustrates a case of disempowerment in which both the state and communities evade critical reflection and do not engage with each other through dialogue. For example, there is no deep discussion of how the poor parents would cope with the changing situations or why rural residents want to enrol their children in private



schools and whether this was the best option. Currently, a sense of despair and hopelessness prevails in society not just for the reason that the state is losing out on retaining students but also because the citizens lose their capacity to claim their fundamental rights. For example, under Article 21A of the Indian Constitution; the Right to Education Act 2010 provides for free and compulsory education for 6-14 year old, yet enrolment is declining in government schools.

(ii) Although the ideology of pure economic growth used by the state and other institutions to legitimize “development” is powerful enough to camouflage the reality of the problems the permanent rural residents face in their daily lives; over time the gap in vision and practice has weakened the confidence of people in the state. Unable to see any future in their village and on their traditional land-based livelihoods, people are either migrating to the sides of the newly constructed roads or moving to nearby towns and even far away cities in the plains. Decreasing population trends in the districts of Almora and Pauri Garhwal have also become a matter of concern to the authorities. However, along with slogans about the Himalayas being the greatest storehouse for biodiversity and a unique culture, emergence of abandoned “ghost villages” point towards the conflict

of interests that have become evident in recent times. As families lose awareness of their physical and social space in the village, they also lose a sense of interconnectedness with their land and people.

How do rural communities, both permanent and migrants, deal with such complex situations? The strong sense of perplexity, mentioned above, points to the need of mutual support systems and knowledge that can address this change, particularly to help people adapt to the new socio-economic order. In this context, mutual connections that could secure a sense of inclusion, and erode seclusion, are required. The proposed programme envisages building up communities by instilling the idea that whilst personal responses to problems may bring isolation and antagonistic reaction, efforts must be made towards strengthening practices of reconnection and united action. While responding to the changes of recent times, all village residents must actively take part in processes that endorse revival of participatory consciousness.

Hence, this programme is about practices that relate to personal and collective consciousness building, both in theory and practice, to create and sustain processes in which communities can exercise choices for change. They engage in dialogue and work towards making the village school functional and attractive to children. They participate in envisioning other alternatives on education and extend their full support in running other centres that would cover areas of education that the formal school curriculum does not cover. Hence, the programme is not about creating a champion or a leading actor who would solve the problems of others but to nurture a movement where everyone participates. All in the community; women, men, children, adolescents, youth and the elders make efforts to create an enabling environment in which educational endeavours thrive. The programme is about practices that nurture a sense of optimism by letting people understand their surroundings and the structures and processes that affect their lives. It is about eroding scepticism among parents, school teachers, voluntary organizations,



educators and others to act together with a sense of a positive outcome.

The core idea that community learning encompasses awareness of the geographical place and appreciation of lived experiences that invariably set in multiple layers of consciousness of the self and the collective means that scholarship would contextualize in the locale. Learner-centred participatory methods have the potential to unfold and reveal the levels of



embodied consciousness in a way that change may occur, or at least be directed towards a desired discourse. The practice of participatory education can challenge the conventional ways of learning to guide a novel discourse which is not only relevant to the changing needs but also pays attention to consciousness building of all members of the community.

### **Responding to educational aspirations of the mountain communities: approach of transformative learning**

While attempting to co-create new possibilities to solve problems in rural areas and also trying to respond to the above mentioned issues through education in Uttarakhand, USNPSS and its network of about 14 community-based organizations spread all over the hill districts of Uttarakhand (Kumaon and Garhwal regions) have envisioned the proposed programme of village-learning centres. The programme is a continuum of our earlier work on education with rural communities and builds on the participatory relational education

paradigm mentioned earlier in this write up. While the village learning centres help in developing an understanding of the community structures, its socio-ecological and economic dimensions with gender and caste as crosscutting issues, the programme is more than that. Development of collective knowledge leads to action to solve problems that the village residents face in their daily lives. Within the community, the centre has a specific educational focus on the following groups:

- (i) Children (ages 3-14)
- (ii) Adolescent girls (11-19 year old)
- (iii) Young men and women (20-40 year old)
- (iv) Women's groups (more than 20 year old)

The centres are a reflection of the community supported by a shared purpose of learning responding to the higher aspirations of rural residents. From our own experience in working with children of all ages and with adults,



especially women and youth, we have learnt that community learning occurs by understanding oneself and by examining the socio-political construction within which the village functions as a system. The socio-political structures are understood in terms of gender, caste, economic, educational disparities; and the ecological dimension is integrated to the process of collaborative learning to understand the village as a whole. The change in the self and in the community can be achieved by fostering the following two processes:

1. All community members including men, women, youth, adolescents and children work towards a common goal, although activities may differ based on their needs and ages
2. The learning centre will not only offer the physical space to meet and talk on a regular basis but also provide a common framework to explore and examine issues for change. The process of open dialogue among community members will foster an educational progression where *critical reflection on lived experiences* would allow development of different perspectives to understand and work on issues of common interests.

Research on adult learning across the world has shown that *reflection on lived experiences* is a pre-requisite for bringing about change in attitudes and behaviour. The programme not only provides the rural communities an opportunity to work together and reflect on issues but also encourages them to explore and uncover their own assumptions and prejudices. This educational approach addresses the needs of rural communities with integration of their lived experiences for continued action for change.

The transformative process entailed in community learning is empowering. Besides hosting educational material such as books, sport equipment and toys which children can use, the adolescents, youth and adults learn to examine the socio-political and economic structures and their impact on them as individuals and as a community. For example, they learn how the structures of patriarchy, caste and other disparities affect their lives. Women, begin to understand how patriarchy has positioned them in a disadvantageous situation; and build up solidarity to establish a collective force to challenge the discriminatory forces that affect their lives. Similarly, the socially disadvantaged groups begin to understand how they may create space for themselves, change their status and move forward. Adolescents and youth recognize their rights and increase their

capacity to create new possibilities in the village and have more control over their lives.

Trusting people and having faith in their capacity to change has been a guiding principle in designing this programme. Over time, USNPSS has worked *with* communities, not *for* them, and witnessed the changes that have occurred in villages. More recently, the understanding of the changes in villages have inspired the organization to reshape and reorganize its programmes to better suit the needs of communities. Also, the social context of the hill villages provides scope for a new approach which would accommodate and translate into the lived experience of people through the learning centres envisaged in the programme.

### **The quest for change: what comes first, the personal or the social transformation?**

The programme, weaves together ideas of integrating research and action in the field of transformative learning in India. While envisaging the programme, several rounds of discussions with partner organizations and women's groups were held. These discussions have generated an interesting set of questions that basically pertain to the issue of whether personal transformation leads to social transformation or vice versa. The other possibility that the processes of personal and social transformation are embedded in each other is equally valid. Looking at transformation with a holistic worldview can certainly amplify complexities compared to the processes of bringing out change in a unidirectional manner.

Another issue in visualizing change from personal transformation leading to social transformation lies in designing educational programmes. While tracking and writing about personal transformation makes an interesting read, translating that in a programme leads to many complications in the community. How can educators bring about a focus in programmes without being labelled

as too individualistic? Also, taking the lead from personal to social change approach can pose problems of scaling up of the programme, because transformative processes require the participants to flow with the current in a particular time and place.

Probably, rather than taking the approach that personal transformation is a pre-requisite for social transformation or vice versa, the educators need to acknowledge both as essential determinants of change. Personal and social are nested in each other. There seems to be no unilateral path in which personal may lead to social transformation. While too much effort directed towards achieving social transformation may deter inner journey, too much emphasis on personal transformation can also collide with the processes of social change. Taking a holistic view, the programme is better able to inculcate ideas of connectivity, solidarity, sensitivity and respect to each other in the community (Box 1).

As of now, based on our experience of running 75 learning centres currently (since August 2014) and in innovating and implementing educational programmes over the last two and a half decades, we understand that it is through direct association and participation of communities in collective activities that personal transformation is able to reveal itself. As community members connect to each other with the aim of achieving specific shared goals, they begin to promote a development perspective that they had never experienced before. They connect with new ideas, use new words (of education, environment and development) and begin to create and sustain activities beneficial to themselves and to their villages (Box 1). In view of the new perspectives they negotiate issues with each other and with their surroundings to achieve personal benefits.

It is only through questioning and changing the prevailing structures that the participants can achieve their shared goal for change. For example, it is by understanding and challenging the structures of patriarchy that women can change their position of

### **Box 1. Rural women reflect on transformation**

During a congregation of women, Revati Arya (a woman from socially disadvantaged community) from Phadiyali village, district Pithoragarh, said, “when the women’s group was not formed in the village, we used to quarrel a lot. There were no sanitation facilities. We had water shortage and children were not sent to school. While mothers would go out to the fields, children would quarrel among themselves. Tired mothers would come home to find their children fighting with each other. Angry, they would shout, use abusive words and show no respect to others.

However, when the group was formed, we started to learn new words. We began to sit together. A different kind of bonding occurred. We realized that all of us were equally devastated; we began to sympathize with each other. Not only were we learning new words of development, of education, and health but also began to use new words that showed respect while talking. I think, this is the most wonderful change that has occurred in our village. Once a sense of solidarity built up, it was easy to implement new projects.

A balwadi was opened for young children. Women began to identify their problems and found solutions. The village became clean. We worked together to provide clean drinking water to every household....earlier we used to fight over availability of water in the village. A few households were getting more than the others. Unequal distribution of water was the problem. Also, people would go and defecate near the water source. The women’s group took action on the issue. Our health was taken care of. Personally, I have received assistance from USNPSS for an operation..I had stones in my kidney. But, I also think that everyone in my village has benefitted because we have installed latrines in the village. Also, during the monthly meetings of the women’s group, we talk about nutrition, health and sanitation.

We also attended literacy centres. Women in my village have learnt a lot. Now, all girls go to school. They have also formed a *kishori sangathan*. Members of the women’s group have been elected in panchayats. They have become *gram pradhan* and ward members. Now our village is a different place and we like it”.

**Source: Uttarakhand Women’s Federation, Almora**

powerlessness to emancipation. Changes in stereotyped gender-based roles and responsibilities can only be brought about by understanding the socio-political\*, ecological and economic structures and processes; and acting together to find solutions to problems of daily



life in the village. Each centre, therefore, must move beyond the boundaries of just providing access to education for children to integrate the whole community in the process of learning.

### **Village learning centre**

A village learning centre integrates the needs and aspirations of women, men, youth, adolescents and children to nurture participatory learning processes with a common educational framework. It provides a shared space to communities to learn and make their concerns known to the world outside. The idea of inclusiveness prevails in the centre. Respecting and giving value to rural women's lived experiences would help communities transform in an ecologically and gender sensitive manner. Similarly, the progression is enriched by the incorporation of the wisdom of the elderly and aspirations of children and adolescents. The educational impacts of such an endeavour are manifold because the process of integration not only develops each individual as a creator of knowledge but also an agent of change.

\*Participation in political discourse does not necessarily mean joining a political party or getting involved in active politics. It requires communities, especially women and adolescent girls, to participate in a process that would address inequalities of power at home, in the village and beyond.

The physical space to run the centre is provided by the community, mostly free, the maintenance of which is the responsibility of the women's group in the village. The selection of the facilitator (*sanchalika*) is carried out in an open meeting in the village itself. About 95% of the facilitators are girls, a majority in the age group 18-22 years. The women's group in coordination with the CBO selects the facilitator, later to be trained by USNPSS at Almora. The centres open in the evening; six days a week. Following the busy schedule on Sunday, Monday is marked as the weekly holiday.

The village learning centres offer trans-disciplinary facilities that present multiple educational opportunities to children, adolescents, youth, women and men:

**(i) For children**

After-school activities focus on mental, physical and emotional development of children. Children in the age group 6-14 (elementary stages of schooling) attend, although the centre is open for all. Often, young children (3-5 years) also come along with their siblings. Each centre hosts a library containing books suitable for all ages. The young children see the picture books, sing with others and play. The older children read story books, take part in plays, organize skits, sing and shout slogans about change.



Computer literacy has also been encouraged in some centres. It is a popular activity for two reasons. First, the informal



environment in the centre promotes interaction among children. Second, children are encouraged to work on computers; which is different from learning in schools where students are inhibited from even touching the computer for fear of spoiling it.

Owing to inadequate learning achievements in schools, especially in the areas of mathematics and language, special attention is paid to these two subjects. Special educational materials such as the “*jodo gyan kit*”, games and puzzles etc. are used to impart knowledge of mathematical concepts to children in elementary stages of schooling.

Measurement skills are improved when children begin to understand the standard and the indigenous measures of length, volume etc. using artefacts available in the village. The concept of “*nali*” (the local unit of land measurement) is understood by actually measuring a field or the land around the centre. Further, children may make a visit to the nearby water source to measure its outflow. Keeping a record of the seasonal variations in the quantity of outflow is not only useful for children from an educational perspective but also becomes a point of discussion in monthly village meetings organized by women’s groups.



Children are encouraged to draw, paint and to create shapes and patterns using waste-paper and other objects available in the village itself. Stories, chart-reading, use of rhyming words to develop songs and poems, debate, poster making, essay writing, learning to read

news-papers etc. are some of the activities encouraged to develop language skills.

Learning about the environment is an integral part of activities carried out in the centre. Though children in 11-14 year age group study environmental education in schools, they re-visit the concepts and exercises prescribed in the work books “Our Land Our Life” in the centre with other children. By making a model of their own village, children develop an understanding of the location, boundaries and status of resources including land, forests, water sources, grassland, homes and the agricultural fields available to their community. This three dimensional view of the village not only generates curiosity about the place and its ecology but also enhances geographical and mapping skills.

In addition, children meet with the adolescents on Sunday, discuss the books that they have read and learn to talk with others. They question barriers of caste and gender at a young age to develop an understanding of the importance of equality. Also, adolescents attend meetings of women’s group and talk about issues of inequality within and between communities (Box 2).

## **(ii) For adolescent girls**

Sunday is the busiest day of the week. Being a holiday, adolescent girls, who otherwise attend schools, come to the centre in the morning by 11 am. The meeting of the *kishori sangathan* (adolescent girls group) is held and plans for the next week are made. They borrow books from the library and discuss issues of relevance to their lives. Self-development, gender, caste-based discrimination, health education (especially preventive health care measures and reproductive health) etc. are some of the issues discussed with adolescent girls.

## **Box 2. Together the children and women address inequality of gender and caste**

In a centre, a few children from the upper caste families had refused to sit on the same mattress with the socially disadvantaged groups. A discussion on social equality was initiated by the facilitator but had no effect. The next day, seeing the children from the upper caste households occupying the mattress, children from the other castes would not sit in the room. The facilitator asked for another round of discussion on equality and justice. Also, several meetings with the members of the women's group were held in the village. While women would agree to the idea of caste and gender based equality in principle, very little would change in practice.

The facilitator kept thinking about it. Also, she would talk to the staff of USNPSS and also raised the issue in meetings with other facilitators working in the same area.

In November 2014, a *gram shikshan kendra-mela* (learning centre fair) was held in a nearby village. Women and children from this particular village were invited to attend. The facilitator sought the help of the CBO in selecting the group that would visit the village. While the community would have preferred a single-caste group, the CBO insisted on representation from all the castes. Also, adolescent girls were asked to join the group. Subsequently, all of them travelled together to participate in the fair.

Slowly, the children began to hold hands during games. The adolescents began to talk about gender and caste based discrimination in the community. Irrespective of caste and class, all members of the women's group began to sit together to discuss issues of development in the village. They travelled together to participate in meetings at Almora. The whole process has helped children; and also the community, to strengthen their relational way of being in the village.

A variety of sports equipment available in the centre make it an attractive place even for children who otherwise may not attend either due to their age or gender. For example, prior to opening up of the learning centres in many villages, girls in adolescent stages were not allowed to run and play any outdoor games. Girls did exhibit keen interest in sports but the gender stereotyping had created such a strong barrier that no girl would either run or play in the village. The trained facilitators took up this issue with communities in open meetings and discussions were started. After several rounds of meetings within and between communities and informal discussions with parents, girls were allowed to play a few games like skipping ropes, badminton etc. in the evenings.

**(iii) For young men and women**

Adolescent boys and youth visit the centre either to borrow



books or to play with others. Men and young boys come to read the local newspaper that each centre receives daily. The newspaper has reached many villages for the first time and the residents are

exposed to the news outside their own region. They also become aware of the issues being raised in the community meetings of women and adolescents.

Enabling story books and other educational aids reach the remote villages is an important task in itself because for the first time such material has become available to communities. Also, young boys and girls preparing for competitive exams borrow books from the centre.

## Livelihood opportunities

Transformative learning should eventually open up avenues for livelihoods, for ultimately everyone is in need of something to do. Given the geography of the hill areas of Uttarakhand, the traditional



land-based livelihoods depend on the health of the ecosystem. An important aspect of strengthening local livelihoods is by introducing new ideas, gender-friendly tools and natural resource conservation and protection.

Though migration to the cities to seek jobs is a common phenomenon, a fair number of young men return to their village after spending a few years outside. The case of village Galla in Nainital district is an example of this trend. Also, the types of livelihood that men and women seek are influenced by gender-based roles and responsibilities.

The set up through the village learning centre will offer opportunities to interact and build relationships which would enhance livelihood opportunities in villages. Over time USNPSS has built a strong network of youth and tried out land-based livelihoods such as vegetable cultivation, horticulture, fish farming, fruit-processing, knitting and tailoring with them. The emphasis has been on local marketing. Over the years, hundreds of poly-houses and rain-water harvesting tanks have been installed to promote vegetable and fruit tree nurseries, seed production and off-season production in remote villages. However, the changing educational profile and aspirations

also demand that new thinking is developed, especially in relation to livelihoods related to various forms of tourism and transport.

#### **(iv) The women's group**

Members of the women's groups visit the centre every month to hold their meetings. All women of the village are members of a single group called the whole village group (WVG). They extend support to each other; especially to widows, deserted and single women; and take up small projects on development and facilitate the process of social transformation.

Over time, some of the issues taken up by women's groups for action are protection and conservation of forests, water sources and of local crops, equal access to education and health care facilities, provision of safe water and sanitation, raising voices and taking collective action against alcoholism and gambling among men, cleaning the village paths and homes, providing free space to run educational centres and monitoring daily activities carried out by facilitators with children and adolescents in villages.

The members of the women's groups took active part in panchayati raj elections held in June 2014 in Uttarakhand. About 526 persons (379 women) directly associated with the programme have been elected in various positions in the three tier structure of panchayati raj institutions. Since, a majority of them have won the elections with the support of the women's groups in their respective villages they try to work in harmony with the needs of the people, especially women. The elected women representatives (EWRs) have also been trying to reconfigure the contours of changes brought about by forces of globalization in villages. In many cases, the EWRs have sought the support of the women's groups to take decisions on where to lay the new roads so that women are benefitted (for example, constructing pathways to the forests or the grasslands) and damage to the agricultural fields could be minimized.

Further, members of the women's groups protect, conserve and voluntarily set aside a part of the community forest for regeneration.



They manage the grasslands and water sources to improve availability of natural resources in the village. Sometimes, the migrant families allow the village residents to cut grass from their land for free. As a result, not

only a sense of mutual co-operation and support is built between the migrants and the permanent village residents but also the delicate balance in the ecosystem is maintained. Even, in villages where the migrants sell grass to families left behind in the village, social and ecological balance continues to function in a way that everyone is benefitted.

In many villages, a sense of community is maintained by organizing social and religious functions on a regular basis. Both the migrant and the non-migrant families contribute to the village funds that are utilized in carrying out various activities in the village. The migrants may also contribute to the women's fund created by the women's group in the village.

The issue of changes brought about by globalization form part of the discussions during village meetings held under the leadership of women. In addition, joint meetings of young and older women are held to develop an understanding of issues that different generations may refer to.

Rural women, adolescent girls and the facilitators reflect on their experiences and write about their activities on a regular basis.

Selected articles are published in an annual magazine called “*Nanda*”. This is the first time in the state that an effort is made to publish articles written by rural women and girls. So far, fourteen issues have been published and distributed in villages. In addition, a biannual newsletter “*muskaan*” is published and distributed in villages.

### ***Gram shikshan kendra mela (learning centre fair)***

A display day is organized every year in the village to provide opportunities for children to show the community what they have learnt in the centre. Since such occasions are rare in villages, the residents are full of enthusiasm and extend their full support in organizing the event. The atmosphere is like a village fair and everyone participates.

Children take part in sports, debate, essay writing, drawing and poster making competitions. The artefacts prepared during the year are displayed in the exhibition. The adolescent girls organize plays, sing songs and compete with boys in sports. Representatives of the panchayats, retired personnel (army, principals, teachers etc.) and the village elderly are invited to attend and participate. In addition, children from nearby government and private schools participate in various activities carried out all through the day.

### **Monitoring and assessment**

The centres use a system of systematic grading to regularly monitor student achievement and provide differentiated instructions to support learning of children with varying needs. This is achieved at the following levels:

1. The *sanchalika* (facilitator) keeps a record of her own assessment of progress of each child attending the centre. Sometimes, facilitators of a cluster join hands and conduct assessment of children. For example, in Binta cluster, all the five facilitators go together to each centre to conduct assessment



2. Grading sheets developed by USNPSS are used by trained supervisors to assess progress of children attending the centres

3. The USNPSS staff and the partner CBO make regular visits to the centres to monitor activities and assess progress. An assessment sheet designed for the purpose is used to record progress of each centre. Findings are shared with the facilitators. Feedback is also provided to all CBOs involved in the programme.

### **Limitations**

While the personal understanding of the people involved in visualizing the programme can affect the design, so would the understanding of communities, particularly in later stages of implementation when the centres will be owned by communities. Of particular importance is the role of the facilitators (*sanchalika* and the CBOs) in bringing about and directing the changes occurring in the community. The facilitators are not only responsible for experimenting with, innovating and promoting new ideas but their role extends to nurturing activities that might emerge by engaging in discussions with communities.

Thus the greatest need is of persons who have themselves reflected on the issue of transformation and can interact in a group with an open mind.

### **Outcomes**

By responding to changing needs and aspirations of the rural people, USNPSS intends to develop socially responsive communities capable of pursuing personal change and taking action for collective transformation. The programme entails collective inquiry and collaborative learning in theory and practice to create communities that are willing to learn and engage in critical reflection to uncover their own assumptions on education and development. Such learning

communities act together for transformation of their own self and of the village and the region of which they form a part.

A personalized and nurturing learning experience for all children in the village is the goal at USNPSS. While improved academic achievements are noted, social and emotional development helps children to maintain positive relationships and exhibit responsibility and decision making skills in schools and the community.

## **Why USNPSS**

USNPSS is in a perfect position to configure and organize the proposed initiative in Uttarakhand. Since its inception in 1987, the organization has brought out two policy-reforms in the education sector in the state:

- i. The curriculum on environmental education developed by USNPSS has been adopted by the state government as a regular subject in schools. Currently, each year, about 4.5 lakh students in classes 6-8 in all government schools study textbooks developed by USNPSS. This has been the only example of mainstreaming a programme developed by an NGO that has become a part of the regular school curriculum in India and possibly abroad. The state government is implementing the programme for the last fifteen years now.
- ii. The Early Childhood Education programme (ECCE) of the state is based on the *balwadi programme* developed and nurtured by USNPSS for nearly 25 years. Further, the state resource-team on ECCE has been trained by USNPSS and the educational material supplied to the *anganwadi* centres (ICDS programme run by the government) is based on our work.

In addition, one of the first activities when USNPSS started in 1987 was to identify motivated individuals and CBOs/NGOs located all over the hills of Uttarakhand. More than 200 small local

organisations were encouraged and supported to develop and implement small programmes in the communities where they were based. Most of these have grown to form the large network of NGOs in Uttarakhand, either independently or in continued association with USNPSS.

Currently, USNPSS hosts the largest network of rural women's groups in the state of Uttarakhand. Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad (Uttarakhand Women's Federation or UMP) represents about 490 women's groups spread over nine hill districts of Kumaon and Garhwal regions in the state. In addition, the members of the women's groups attend the literacy centres and use a curriculum locally developed by UMP.



It is the steady involvement and participation in learner-centred activities that must lead to the process of community learning. Through collaborative participation among USNPSS, CBOs and the community groups (women's groups, adolescent groups, youth groups etc.), the programme will create new settings in which the rural residents can think, plan and work for their own development. Through open discussions and critical reflection on their experiences in working together for the common good, the participants will be able to experiment with new ideas and apply their learning for betterment of their own village and beyond.

## **Background of the organization**

USNPSS is a registered non-government organization working in the field of education, environment and gender in the hill villages of Uttarakhand in the Himalayas. The organization began its work in Uttarakhand in 1987 as a nodal agency for the Department of Education, Government of India, till 2005. Further, for over ten years (1993-2005), the organization has acted as a regional resource agency of the Ministry of Environment and Forests for the National Environment Awareness Campaign (NEAC) in Uttarakhand. Since 2006 the organization has received support from the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, Mumbai and the Rajeshwar Susheela Dayal Charitable Trust, Delhi (since 2003) for its major programmes on education and women's development in the hills of Uttarakhand.

In the beginning of the programme multiple educational opportunities were provided to children and women in villages of Uttarakhand where no other facility for education was available. In remote villages of the Himalayas, pre-school centres were run by creating and supporting a network of community-based organizations. Women's groups, groups of adolescent girls and youth were formed and nurtured by providing training and financial support to them to think of and implement community-based programmes. In addition, a new subject on environment education for students in 11-16 age groups was developed, tested and mainstreamed in the school curriculum.

During this period, networks of communities including teachers, students, women's groups, rural girls have been formed across the state in more than 400 villages to improve access to education, health, nutrition, safe sanitation, water, fuel wood and fodder. With the result, villages where not a single girl had completed elementary education now boast of all girls enrolled in schools, some

of them in colleges. Similarly, in villages where parents would not consider immunization necessary; now all infants are vaccinated against the six deadly diseases. Further, in villages saturated with toilet facilities, occurrence of water-borne diseases has reduced in a significant manner.

Over time, evening centres for children attending government primary schools were run in remote villages of Uttarakhand where teacher absenteeism was high and the quality of education poor. In addition, the organization has started libraries in villages to provide learning opportunities to children and adults. The programme has not only fulfilled the need of books other than textbooks used in schools but also created an enabling environment for girls to read and take



part in sports. Libraries and sporting activities have become a boon in villages, where adolescent girls were barred from taking part in any such activity which involved running, jumping and playing with

boys. Further, computer learning centres have been meeting an ever increasing demand by children and their parents to be computer literate.

Having achieved these results in some villages, USNPSS has planned a two pronged strategy to work in the future:

1. Continue with the on-going programme in villages where the demand exists

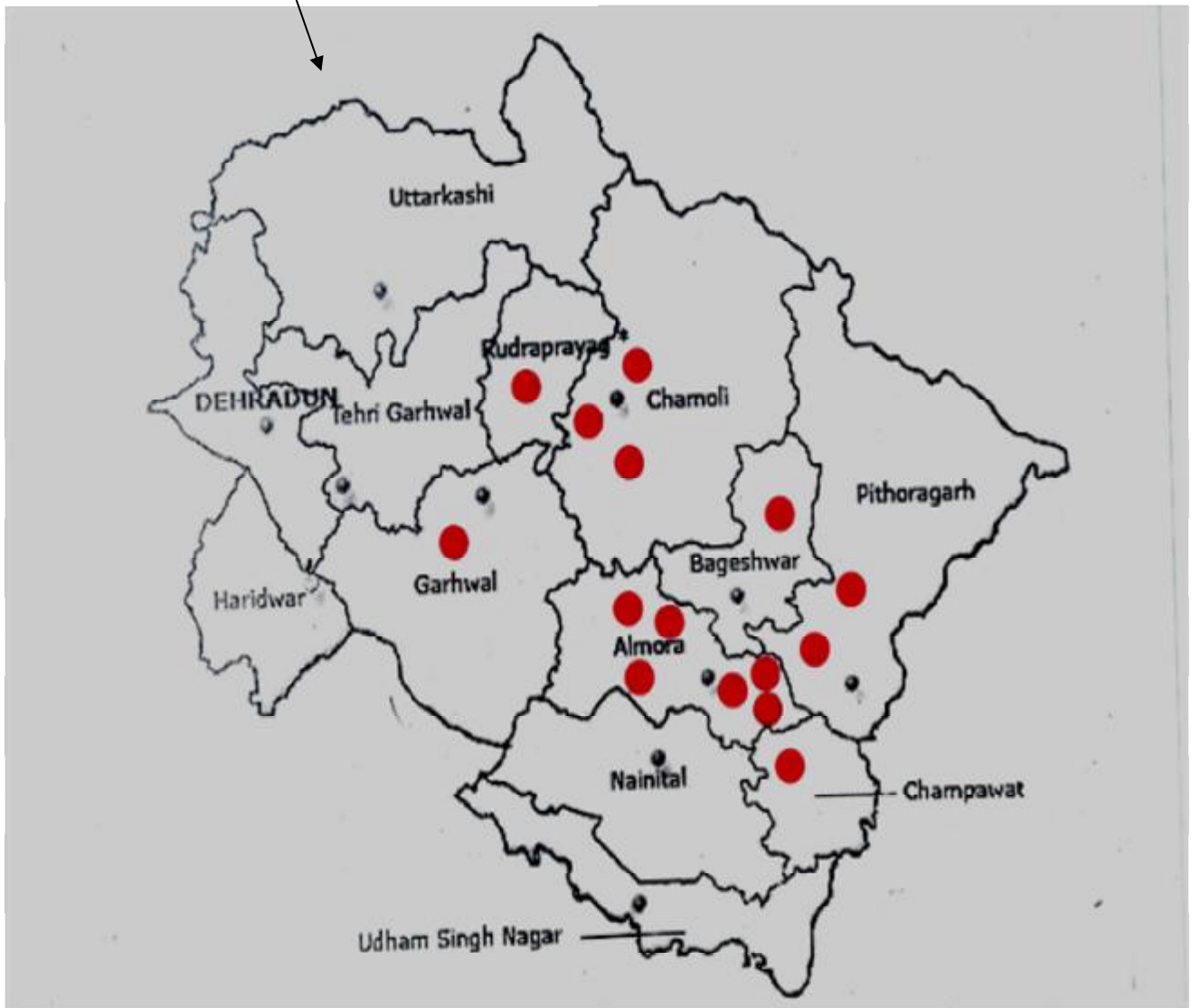
2. Respond to the higher aspirations of communities where the goals set earlier in the programme have been achieved. The need for such an endeavour arises due to the fact that the pace and complexity of changes, especially a change in values towards education and standards of living, are of a scale never experienced before in the mountains. Further, attitudes towards education of girls are changing very fast which in itself is a reflection of the transformation in the consciousness of communities.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, USNPSS acknowledges the systemic, not linear, nature of change brought about by educational activities in the community. It is also committed to processes that facilitate that change. Since change can occur both at the personal and the social level, we respect both individual and collective experiences and responses towards one's surroundings and to oneself. In other words, the programme acknowledges interconnections of relations with the self and the outer world to promote transformation in villages of Uttarakhand. It is hoped that participation in the programme will build resilient communities capable of responding to the rapid changes occurring in villages as a result of both internal and external forces.

It is also important to remember that community, environment and development are linked, and regardless of aims, community learning is a key approach, whether the major issue is climate change, health, economic development or livelihoods.

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Clusters of village learning centres supported by USNPSS since August 2014. The programme covers seven hill districts of Uttarakhand.



