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# ASSERTING RIGHTS ACCESSING ENTITLEMENTS

A report on the implementation of the Project: "Increasing access to information on the Government Schemes and Entitlements in Backward Districts in Northern India" in Chamba in Himachal Pradesh





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A report on the implementation of the Project: “Increasing access to information on the Government Schemes and Entitlements in Backward Districts in Northern India” in Chamba District, Himachal Pradesh

### Introduction

Chamba district, in the state of Himachal Pradesh (HP), in Northern India in its present form came into existence on 1st November 1966 consequent upon the reorganization of the erstwhile Punjab. The district is situated in the bosom of the Himalayas. It is bound in the North West by the state of Jammu & Kashmir, on the north east and east by Barabhangal area of Kangra district of HP and on the south east and south by the districts of Gurdaspur (Punjab) and Kangra (HP). The district centre is located 361 kilometres from Shimla, the state capital.

In Chamba district there are mainly three scheduled tribes named Pangwala, Gaddi and Gujjar. The Gaddi and Pangwala are Hindus and are engaged in agricultural as well as animal (sheep and goats) rearing activities. Gujjars (Muslims) rear buffaloes and move up and down between mountains and plains according to seasons. The first two are economically and socially well-off than the Gujjars. Most of them have access to basic facilities like education, health, water, etc. But the Gujjars live a nomadic life and remain mostly uncovered by the welfare/development schemes of the Government. Gujjars

came to this region during the eleventh century. The Gujjars are a pastoral agricultural ethnic group with populations in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In different locations the Gujjars have followed different paths of social evolution. In Jammu & Kashmir and in Himachal Pradesh they are Muslim and categorised as Scheduled Tribe.

The major sources of income of Chamba are agriculture, animal husbandry and labour work. The agriculture is totally rain-dependent and the rearing livestock also cannot fulfill livelihood requirements. Thus apart from migration due to nomadic and semi-nomadic patterns of livelihood, people migrate out of the area for labour work, which is not easily available locally. The season of migration is June-September and during this season women and children are left at home to take care of agriculture and livestock. In order to address backward conditions here, ActionAid with the support of European Commission in January 2014 started work in Chamba block of Chamba district. Work in Chamba was part of the project: “Increasing access to information on the Government Schemes and Entitlements in Backward Districts in Northern India” and was supported by the European

Commission and anchored by ActionAid India (AAI) in six districts across five states in India – Barabanki and Pratapgarh in Uttar Pradesh, East Champaran in Bihar, Latehar in Jharkhand, Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh and Chamba in Himachal Pradesh. ActionAid India also anchored the project in Chamba. The project extended to 40 villages of 20 panchayats in Chamba and Mehla block.

In Chamba district there are seven development blocks, six tehsils, three sub-tehsils and five sub divisions. There are several pro-poor policies of government like laws such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), Forest Rights Act, Right to Education Act, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) for livelihood, as well as entitlements (food and nutrition and employment) for the Gujjar communities in Himachal Pradesh. However the implementation of these schemes remained a challenge, especially in the Chamba district.

The project aimed at:

- 1) Increasing capacity and responsiveness of local administration and Panchayat Raj Institutions in providing information and access to public services to poor and marginalized.
- 2) Increasing awareness and capacity of poor and marginalised communities to demand and access information and public services.
- 3) Ensuring community based planning, monitoring, transparency and accountability practices are established to provide information and review performance of public services and schemes with active participation of organisations of poor and marginalised.
- 4) Actively participating in advocacy effort.

The intervention is informed by the belief in the importance of:

- » Promoting the active agency of the marginalized community in accessing their own needs and finding their own solutions to their own problems.

- » Building solidarity with the poorest and ensuring that struggles for justice and rights begins from below.
- » Partnership with other civil society organisations.
- » Engaging policy-makers and implementing agencies.

Across all states and districts the intervention sought to build social practices amongst vulnerable communities around five points. One initial step was to build awareness and ensure access to public services, entitlements and rights through proper implementation of policies, schemes and laws. The attempt was also to initiate vulnerable communities into planning by developing village development plans through participatory planning processes. The community was also encouraged to review and monitor public services through processes such as social audit and public hearing. A system of knowledge management was initiated by setting up information resource centres in villages. The learnings achieved by the community through these practices were channelled towards activating panchayati raj institutions on the issues of concern to the community.

This report seeks to draw out the best practices achieved and the lessons learnt from the project implementation in Chamba district, Himachal Pradesh.

## Challenges and Lessons Learnt

AAI's activities on the ground have received a great deal of cooperation from the community. Initially there was some resentment from the elected representatives, because they felt that this programme is sought to expose their corruption only. However since many of AAI's subsequent initiative sought to include elected representatives as well, the goodwill of the elected representatives was soon gained in accessing entitlements.

AAI's experience shows that the access to entitlements to most marginalized communities among Dalits and pastoral tribes can be greatly facilitated by encouraging dialogue and interaction between community leaders, government officials and women. Representatives from vulnerable communities and groups need to participate in discussions with state and district level officials so that authorities can be sensitized to community needs. AAI initiative shows that the involvement of community in planning process, review and monitoring of the schemes and making government accountable can bring the change. ■



## ASSERTING RIGHTS, ACCESSING ENTITLEMENTS

### BEST PRACTICE I

## Ensuring Citizenship Rights of Gujjar community

As the Gujjars stay in remote pasture lands they are unable to avail of many of the facilities provided by the Government. As a result, they lag behind in all the spheres of development. The Gujjars, who once were known for their strong and tall physique, are now characterized by weak and ailing bodies.

The Gujjars stay in the hills for the sake of their cattle that they rear. As in the hills they get good amounts of grass on which the survival of their cattle as well as their own self depends. However this is no longer a sustaining livelihood, but they cannot escape as they do not have any other livelihood options. They did not have ration cards or voter ID cards. In other words, they had no valid document to substantiate their status as Indian citizens. As a result, they could not enjoy any of the government welfare schemes for the poor. Access to facilities like health, education, transport and communication seem only a distant dream.

The migratory nature of their livelihood means that the Gujjars more often than are falling off the map when it

comes to availing government benefits. However, once they are registered and have obtained some crucial documentation, the situation has now transformed for the Gujjars. The authorities are forced to take notice of them, and provide for their wellbeing.

The initial efforts of ActionAid India in 2014 focused on facilitating processes for the registration of Gujjar households. One of the pre-requisite for registration is the submission of a copy of the father's registration certificates. Most Gujjar communities have never been registered; their children are first generation school goers.

### **Registration for the Gujjar community**

*Between 2014 and 17, 187 Gujjar children were registered, and 628 Gujjar & Dalit families were registered.*

Registration of Gujjars in panchayats is their first step to citizenship. In Pilur panchayat, Bashir Ahmad spoke about how he struggled hard to put his family of ten on the entitlements map. "Without registration documents we are nothing," he said.

The community is now realizing the importance of registering themselves as citizens of India because they are also reducing their migration. They are settling down in a place. The younger generation would want to access schools and hospitals. Therefore, they need entitlements and forest protection now, more than ever in history.

Some of the outcomes of registration include:

- » Efforts of sensitizing fellow citizens, administrators and policymakers on the chronic issues of the Gujjar communities have resulted in policymakers taking note of the existence of these large population and mentioning them at every relevant

platforms, documents and widening the reach of many of the welfare schemes designed for marginalized communities.

- » A breakthrough came when the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh recognized that large populations of Gujjar communities have never been benefitted from welfare schemes. A delegation of District Gujjar Welfare Society, a community-based organization formed with the encouragement of AAI, met the Chief Minister to bring to the notice of the authorities the conditions faced by these communities in Himachal Pradesh. As a result the government took note of the demands and made the registration process easier.

## Success story – Lobbying with Government

The Muslim Gujjars of Chamba, Himachal Pradesh exhibit varied livelihood patterns -- nomadic, semi-nomadic and settled and all centering on dairy farming. Gujjars remained isolated from the mainstream of society, maintaining their own traditional cultural identity even in the cases where a few of them have adopted a settled mode of living. The households who have settled are still rearing buffaloes as their main family occupation.

Gujjars move with the seasons. It is important for their herds to have plenty of grazing. Winter in the plains is ideal because after the monsoon, the pastures are green and the cold is well within the tolerance level of the cattle. But summer compels them to move up into the lesser Himalayas where the snow has melted into fresh young grass and one can escape the searing heat of the plains. Gujjars keep to low mountain pastures, within say 10,000 feet above average sea level.

There are around 40,000 Gujjars in Chamba district. The community cannot access education for their children and the adults cannot stake claim on employment opportunities provided by the state. Only 10 to 12 people of this community have government jobs. Rest of the families depend on sale of milk produce. Selling milk and other dairy products is important to the Gujjar community as they are mainly cattle herders, and since they depend on the sale of milk for their sustenance, it is imperative that they get their due. However most Gujjars were underpaid for their produce.

From far reaches of Chamba they had to go to the district town to sell their milk and milk products. They had to go door-to-door to sell their products every morning. Rates for the sale of milk were not fixed and people would purchase milk on their own rates. Stating their issues the community leaders said, "We were going in loss and had no option to sell our produce. We had written officials about our problem, but the situation remained as it was."

With the support of ActionAid India, the milk producers formed 'Pragati Swayam Sahayata Samuh'. Over time about 250 Gujjar families joined and together they produced 1000 litres of milk every day. The society wrote to the District Collector of Chamba with the help of Gujjar Welfare Board, a community-based organisation.

"We also sent a copy of the letter to the chairperson of Cooperative Banks and the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh," said community leader Hasandeel. Their demands included the setting up of a shop in Chamba town to sell milk and milk products. They were allocated a shop and the cooperative is now selling milk and milk products at market price. The families are happy with profits they are getting now. ■



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### BEST PRACTICE II Creating Village Development Plans

In Mehla and Chamba, ActionAid India (AAI) used the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) processes to understand the needs of the people and to ensure that the plans developed were responsive to local needs and people's priorities. The plans were informed by a detailed situation analysis covering different aspects, themes and sectors related to local level development is conducted.

The AAI team started with the building the capacity of gram sabha members with special focus on women and youth on inclusive development and planning process through trainings. During the training the possibility of strengthening transparency in decision-making through sharing of information with gram sabhas; and the scope for bottom-up participatory planning which could help align public resource allocation with locally felt needs and priorities, mediated by democratic decision making were also discussed.

The process of formulation of village development plans (VDPs) was facilitated in 40 villages in 20 panchayats by the AAI team with the support of youth volunteers. Meetings were conducted in 40 villages

to prepare new plans for the current year. The participation of the sarpanch and PRI members was ensured during the meetings. The community-based organisations and community leaders mobilised the marginalized communities to collectively reflect on their situation and define their needs and how best to meet them by using participatory rural appraisal tools.

First, the situation analysis looked at the demographics in the villages. The aim was to understand the number of men, women and children in different age groups and how the village is divided by ethnicities. Marking different ethnic groups on a rough map of the village was the next step. This was called social mapping.

Then the natural resources of the village were mapped – including agricultural land, water and forests. This process was termed resource mapping.

Once they knew who lived in the village and where the natural resources were, they tried to find out who among the villagers were worse off. The "well-being

analysis" threw up the economic status of the villagers, which was also recorded on the map.

The situation analysis ensured that each plan took into consideration the basic data on the gram panchayat – geographical area, social structure, statistical details on panchayat, village map, information on education, health, migration cycle, agriculture, crop cycle, and natural resources etc, and these exercises were also informed by the baseline survey. Detailed village development plans were prepared through these exercises, which helped in the analysis of the village's problems and formulating an action plan as suggested by the villagers. Once the map and the situational analysis are finalized, they are presented to the Gram Sabha, which either accepted the proposal or not.

***The facilitators met small groups of villagers and discussed with them the most important events in the community's past and prepared with that information a historical timeline was prepared which served as the basis for future work.***

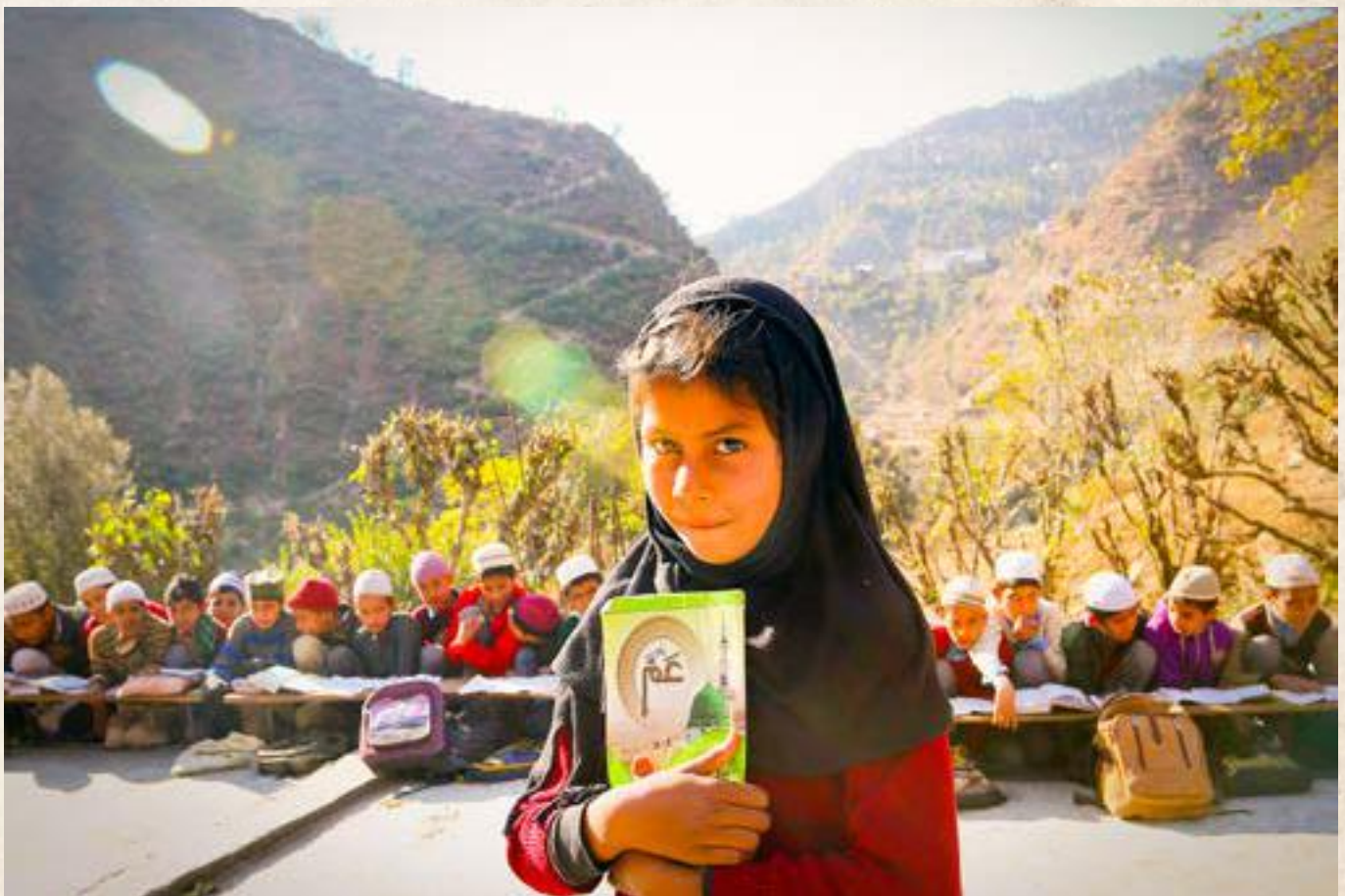
The key problems of Gujjar community in addressed in the VDPs included schools and access to education, drinking water, mud roads for walking/grazing, link roads, especially in the upper reaches of the hilly terrain, bridges (between the hills/mountains) and housing.

## Success stories

It is considered a huge success that women participated in greater numbers in all the VDPs conducted in Mehla and Chamba. All the VDPs were approved by gram sabhas. This improves the community confidence in the participatory process. Such confidence boosting measures are important to ensure that the community is self-dependent.

As a result of the village development plans:

- » Six bridges were completed in a budget of Rs 18.5 lakhs
- » Six primary schools were sanctioned benefitting 172 students, off which 150 are Gujjars
- » Three schools were upgraded from Primary School to Middle and Middle School to High School.
- » Nine community halls were completed for a budget of Rs 26.5 lakhs
- » Eight link roads were completed with a budget of Rs 33 lakhs.
- » Four new drinking water schemes were sanctioned in the project region.
- » 23 footpaths or mud roads for walking or grazing animals were paved.
- » Nine community toilets were built for a budget of Rs 15 lakh. ■





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### BEST PRACTICE III Conducting Social Audit and Public Hearing

Social Audits are now widely accepted as an important mechanism to address corruption and strengthen accountability in government service delivery.

In Mehla and Chamba block of Chamba district, the social audit process was used to review and monitor the government actions on the ground in implementation of National Food security Scheme, Social security Scheme and Right to Education Act. To facilitate this process AAI team trained community leaders and volunteers to design the conduct of these social audits.

The first step to setting up the social audit process in the panchayats was to develop a pool of trained community leaders. In 2014 and 2015 training sessions were organized for the community leaders and AAI created team for doing this audits. The social auditors were youth from beneficiary families of said schemes who the team felt would have a stake and thus would be actively involved both in conducting the audit as well as taking lessons from the audit to continue monitoring the programme after the audit.

Social audits followed by public hearings were organized in 18 panchayats. Community and elected representative's participation in social audit and public hearing was commendable. There were many social audits of which, most notable ones were on MNREGA, schools and ICDS centres.

During the social audit on MNREGA it was found that applications for job cards were not taken, record of jobs cards were not completed, new job cards were not issued, dates for job applications were not fixed, boards were not available at work sites and payments were not made on time.

#### Impact of social audit

- » Dates for job application under NREGA has been fixed in all the 20 Panchayats.
- » Muster roll and board present at work site
- » Quality of work has been improved and 5830 people, including 536 Gujjar women, were employed under MNREGA.



- » Budget and expenditure displayed in all 20 panchayats
- » Rs. 4,38,500 pending wages released after social audit
- » Rs. 2,50,000 Kaila Panchayat anganwadi work completed after social audit
- » Between 2014 and 2015, 129 out of 146 people were linked with the pension scheme.
- » 112 girls were linked with Beti Hai Anmol project, which aims to reduce the gap in the sex-ratio.
- » AAI also managed to re-enroll 98 school dropouts. ■





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## BEST PRACTICE IV Setting Up Information Resource Centres

In order to streamline the flow of information and to better reach all sections of the population, Action-Aid India (AAI) set up Information Resource Centres (IRC) in all the 20 Gram Panchayats they were working with. All the centres (non-ICT based) are in housed in Panchayat building, run by village volunteers. These centres acts as interface between local villagers with the block administration, provides information and facilitation of application process related to various entitlements.

Application forms for all government schemes were stocked, pens, note pads and stamp pads were kept in the IRCs. One volunteer sat through one whole day every week to answer queries of villagers on government programmes. The IRCs played a catalytic role as change agent by enabling Panchayati Raj Institutions's (PRI) to link with governmental programmes and schemes, by facilitating access to other institutional frames and development actors. As a result, IRCs have provided a rich reservoir of cases, models and innovations on issues like how PRIs promote better utilization of resources, what hinders/promotes,

women's participation in Gram Sabhas and in Gram Panchayats, etc. These Centres become especially important in panchayats where the Sarpanch is not assertive enough or is prone to corruption.

Because of the IRCs, information was available to 20-25 days in a month, earlier the community had to trek arduous terrain to reach the panchayat and were not sure of getting the relevant information. In Mehla and Chamba block, more than 50% out of 17574 target population report knowledge of public schemes available to them. Also 5,232 out of 17574 target populations, have taken action to access government schemes. 60% of PRIs and local officials started providing information on various services to poor communities.

All 20 Panchayat have started displaying panchayat budgets and beneficiary list of schemes. AAI has handed over to the day-to-day running of the IRCs to the Panchayats & CBOs. They have also began panchayat and community contribution to make it more fruitful and attractive.

The idea is to include more information that is available in IRCs, to better benefit the communities. One of the ways to attract more people to the IRCs is to plan more events at the information centre.

AAI is also considering using IRCs in mobile mode from one village to other village. AAI plans to involve community and PRI members to continue IRCs. In

fact, the Panchayat secretaries sound positive about carrying forward the work of IRCs. Since community-based organisations (CBOs) have been established and trained, they will carry forward the work of getting the right price for dairy products of Gujjars. Transparency will be maintained through writing information of government-run schemes on the walls of panchayats. ■





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### BEST PRACTICE V Activating Panchayats

The biggest achievement of ActionAid India (AAI) in Mehla and Chamba has been to train 230 Panchayati Raj institution (PRI) officials from 20 panchayats of Chamba districts. Moreover, 109 women PRI officials from Dalit and Gujjar communities were trained – for all it was their first training. Remarkably, 43 out of 55 community leaders were elected as PRI members, of which 19 were women.

80% of PRIs and local officials started providing information on various services to vulnerable communities. 64 of the 82 trained panchayati raj officials have started inviting community participation in making their village development plans.

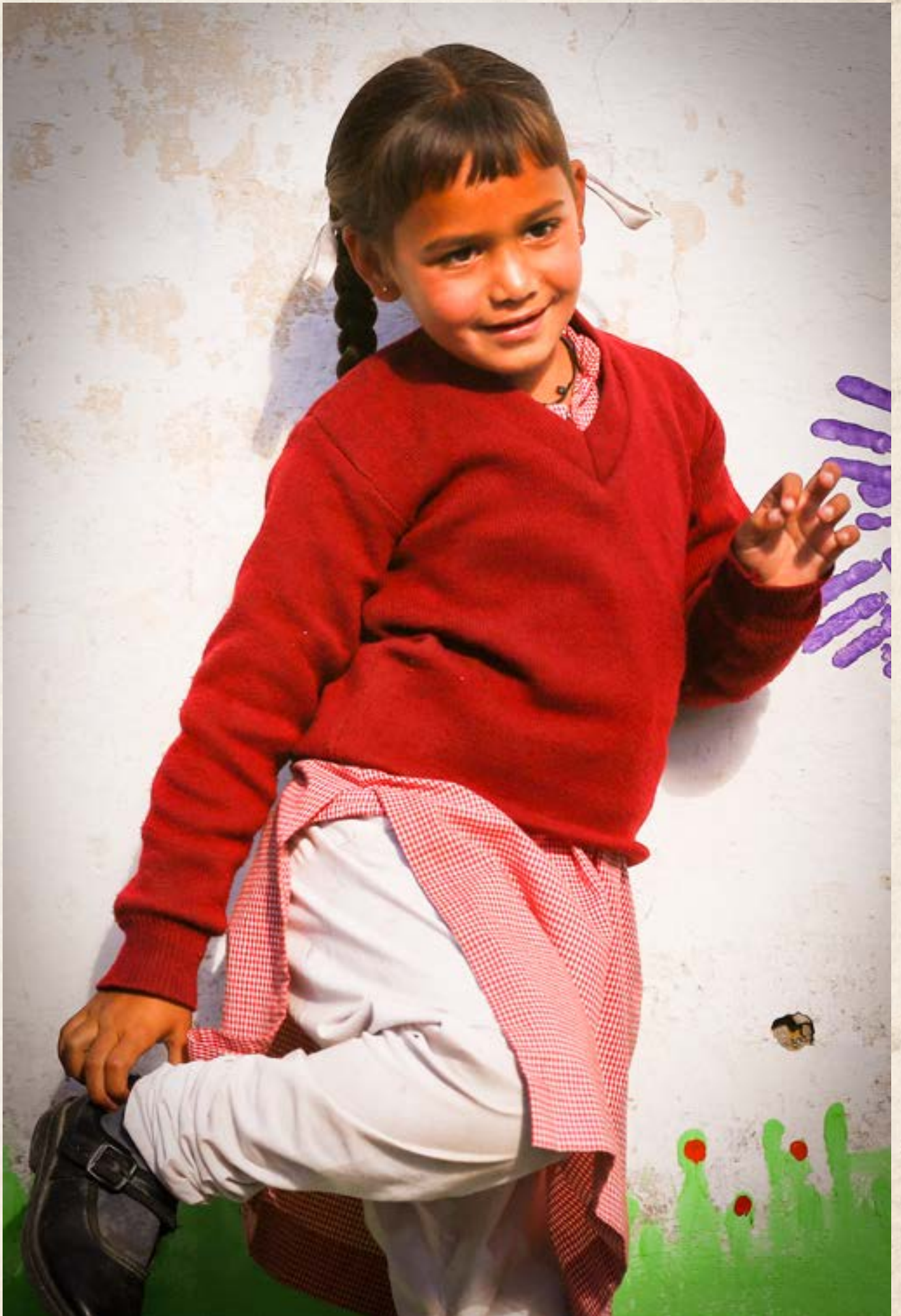
Between 2014 and 2017, 46 trainings and capacity building workshops have been organized on participatory planning, right to information (RTI), right to education (RTE), village development plans (VDP), economic literacy and budget accountability for governance (ELBAG) and state and central schemes. This was carried out through a combination of methods - awareness campaigns, wall writing, Kala Jatha (cultural performances) and one-day camps.

It is crucial that the information regarding government schemes and programmes be displayed in the Panchayat building. This ensures transparency and accountability. All 20 Panchayats have started displaying panchayat budgets and beneficiary list of schemes.

The success of activating panchayats is best witnessed when the community itself demands for social audits in other panchayats.

In Pilure panchayat, Lal Singh the up-pradhan (deputy head) facilitated the implementation of Forest Rights Act, since the Gujjars and other tribal communities depend on forest produce for their existence.

More than 850 villagers in the panchayats prepared claim files but the forest rights committees did not do physical verification. The villagers were frustrated with the non-cooperative attitude of the committees and with the suggestion of forestland movement, they organized village meetings and formed new forest rights committees and informed the Sub-Divisional Level Committee. The committee got approval from SDO. At present, 20 community rights have also been claimed. ■



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