

# Empowering Women through Education

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**T**he Pardada Pardadi Girls' Vocational School is touching the hearts and lives of thousands of socially backward and economically poor students and their families in Anupshahar.

This unique school, set up in 2000 in Uttar Pradesh, is teaching rural girls skills that are immediately marketable and bring in cash as they study. Its teaching method, focused on value-added academics and skill-based vocational courses, caught the imagination of people who perceive it as a means to combat

illiteracy, gender discrimination and unemployment in the area.

The school aims to build a society with equal opportunity for women in development and income generation in a family. "The need of the hour is to provide both academic and vocational education in schools. This will help tackle the decades-old problems daunting the rural society, such as poverty, gender discrimination and illiteracy," says Virender Sam Singh, an Indian American who was born in the region and now promotes this distinctive experiment in education. "If you educate girls you are educating the entire family. Girls with education and vocational training become socially independent and financially self-sufficient. We believe that the woman, as the center of the family, plays an important role in any rural amelioration program. Without education and gainful employment, women



*A student of Pardada Pardadi  
School in Anupshahar  
working on a home  
furnishing embroidery.*



*Clockwise, from right: Students of the Pardada Pardadi School in Anupshahar working on a home furnishing; girls working on computers donated by the Program Development Office of the U.S. Embassy; as commuting is an issue in the region, girls who travel long distances get free bicycles.*

*Left: School promoter Virender Sam Singh spending time with schoolchildren during lunch hour.*

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cannot bring stability to the family and help enhance the family's social and economic status,” says Singh, who is fondly called “Sam” by his friends and locals. He retired in 2000 after serving 37 years with DuPont Corporation, an American multinational company with utilities, textiles, pharmaceutical and chemical interests. Now he aims to fully devote himself to the school's mission of helping girls become economically and socially enlightened. He returned to Bichola, his native village, to do something for the daughters of landless farmers and agricultural laborers.

Sam Singh believes that if India is to progress, education and empowerment of women must be given high priority. If the quality of life of the rural population improves, the quality of life of everyone in the country obviously will go up, says Sam Singh, who donated Rs. 20 million and 17 hectares of land to set up the school.

Poverty, illiteracy and child marriage force many girls in the area to drop out of school by 12 or 13. Employment avenues after school or college are minimal. Women, in particular, have to cope with gender discrimination at every step. As the area is crime-prone, parents discourage their daughters from attending school, fearing for their safety.

The Pardada Pardadi School worked to overcome these hindrances by offering incentives and outreach programs to earn the goodwill of villagers. The school offers a congenial and friendly atmosphere, and doesn't discriminate on the basis of caste or class. Offers of free education, food, uniforms, books and bicycles for commuting generated a great deal of interest among children. Transportation is a key issue in the area for girls, as some commute 20 kilometers daily. Parents are welcome to openly express their views and discuss their problems with the school authorities. As a result, the dropout rate, which was 65 percent in

2000, has come down to 9 percent in the current academic year.

Jobs are scarce in the agricultural belt of Anupshahar, one reason why parents are excited about the school's unique employment guarantee plan and an incentive of Rs. 100,000 cash for each girl who completes her education. Girls who complete schooling in academic year 2007 will receive the full cash incentive. Even if the girl leaves school early, she will get the amount that has been deposited in her bank account daily for her vocational work.

Excellence in academics and vocational training are equally important at Pardada Pardadi School. The first session is devoted to studies, and after lunch the girls are trained in embroidery, sewing, *aari*, *resham*, *zardozi*, applique and block printing. The girls are grouped according to their aptitude, skill and age. After two years of training, seven- to eight-year-old girls become professionally skilled. The sale of products manufactured by junior girls fetches each Rs. 30 per day and senior girls earn Rs. 70 per day. Out of these earnings, Rs. 10 is put in fixed bank deposits in the girls' individual accounts. According to school principal Shankar Sinha, the school's caveat that the individual fixed deposits are allowed to be withdrawn only after the girl completes schooling is working in favor of preventing child marriage.

Villagers in the region have great hope about the school's initiative. Baran Singh, a retired army soldier of nearby Dugrou village, said he would have to spend Rs. 2,000 on each child for similar education in any private school. His daughter, Alkesh, is in class VII and her niece, Krishna, studies in class IV. But at Pardada Pardadi School, “...children are given an opportunity to grow to their fullest potential. Free education, free meals and the



cash incentive at the end of the schooling are beyond our expectation,” Baran Singh says. “The difference in children from Pardada Pardadi and other schools in the area is remarkable. These students gain confidence and the ability to take care of themselves.”

Sinha, a workaholic, travels to villages on weekends to interact and get feedback from parents. “Such visits have a beneficial effect because parents freely discuss their problems. Through interaction with villagers we assess the socio-economic background of children the school intends to admit next year,” says Sinha. The number of students has increased to 286 this year, covering 80 villages. That is a six-fold increase from 45 in 2000. The school plans to cover all 198 villages in the region by 2007, admitting nearly 1,000 students. Sam Singh hopes that the school will serve as a model for girls’ education and village development. The school’s long-term plan is to provide academic courses and vocational training for at least one girl from each of the 50,000 poor families in the Anupshahar region.

Marketing world-class home furnishings such as curtains, cushions, bedspreads and wall hangings, produced by students during their vocational courses, is the key to the success of the school model. The finished products are sold at various outlets—Plaza Mall in Gurgaon and the Central Cottage Industries Corporation emporiums in Mumbai and New Delhi. The school also displayed the high-end products at recent national and international exhibitions in New Delhi.

“India has lots of hands with tremendous skills, and why not use them for productive gain,” says Renuka, the school’s director of development. She says the school expects to attain sustainability within a couple of years. The design of fabrics and furnishings is handled by Madhu Singh, a New Delhi-based

design consultant who helps market the products.

Several individual donors and charity organizations have been supporting Sam Singh’s initiative. In December 2004, the Program Development Office of the U.S. Embassy gave a \$43,600 grant to set up a computer lab in the school for providing computer education to 500 girls for two years. It also donated 20 computers and two printers in support of the program. The computer lab is run on diesel because of erratic power supply in the region. Sofia Blake, wife of Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy Robert Blake, and Michael H. Anderson, Country Public Affairs Officer, inaugurated the computer center, named after Helen Keller, an American icon for the physically challenged. “The computers make schoolchildren design-conscious. They give the children a tool to deal with the modern world and the confidence when they go for higher education. In the practical sense they eventually will be able to use computers for design and keeping track of vocational work they are doing,” says Barbara Hibben, the Embassy grants officer. “This grants program is designed to fit into the mission plan of improving mutual understanding between the two countries and empowerment of women to become economically and socially enlightened in society.”

Like Sam Singh, the students want to help their village and community. They talk about coming back to work as teachers or vocational trainees. Sam Singh believes that this will have a multiplier effect and could be a model for rural development. “Too many people are involved in agriculture in India which is not providing gainful employment,” he adds, “so we need to impart education in a holistic manner that will address the interrelated issues of poverty, illiteracy and gender discrimination.” □