

**Ensuring Children's Access to Education in Areas of Civil Unrest:
Role of Youth in World's Largest Democracy**

By:

Ms. Gunjan Wadhwa

(New Delhi, India)

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I. Introduction

Background and Rationale

Education is important for development of human capacities (Sen 1992, 1996), economic growth (Adeola, 1996), equality (Gradstein, 2003) and social stability (Ritzen, Easterly & Woolcock, 2000). Increased access to education is linked with the promotion of civil society (Walter, 2004) and shows that the government is concerned with the citizens of the country (Thyne, 2006). Notwithstanding all this, it was only in 2009 that India, the world's largest democracy, enacted the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, which provides 8 years of elementary education to every child in the age group of 6-14 years in an age appropriate class. An indication of the enormous demand for education today is that over 95% of the 252 million child population in the 6-14 age group (Census 2001) enrolls into schools in India (192 million in class 1 to 8 as per Statistics of School Education, 2007-08). However, the statistics on retention show that 25.09% of these children drop-out before completing class 5, 42.68% drop-out by class 8 and 56.71% of children drop-out of school before completing class 10. In all, 111 million children are out of school in class 1 to 8 in one of the fastest emerging countries in the world (Statistics of School Education, 2007-08).

The cumulative effect of the above is visible in the percentage of youth reaching secondary and higher education, for which there are no constitutional and legal guarantees. According to the National Family Health Survey 3 (2005-06) only 41% of youth in the 15 to 17 years were attending school. Thus more than half of the adolescents in India are school dropouts. School attendance was lower among girls at 34% than boys at 49%. At age 15-19, the girls' literacy rate lagged behind the literacy rate of boys by 15% (NFHS-3, 2005-06). These disparities are starker with respect to caste, region, community, gender, income etc. leading to sustained marginalization and an inter-generational cycle of poverty.

To make things worse, the violence caused due to the *Naxal* insurgency and counter violence by the State forces has brought to a standstill the functioning of educational institutions for children and has left a deep impact on the governance and development of many States across the country, so much so that today *Naxalism* is the one of the most serious internal threats to India's national security. In such situations of civil unrest, the educational institutions either do not function; since these are occupied by the insurgents or military/armed forces and sometimes forced to shut down to undermine State authority; or are not *accessed* by children and teachers due to fear (NCPCR Report 2010; 2012).

Conceptual Framework

While significant research has taken place to determine the effects of civil war and conflict on educational access, achievements, expenditure and enrolment (Buckland, 2005; Lai and Thyne, 2007; Stermac *et al* 2012) and vice-versa (Ishiyama and Breuning, 2012), the issue remains gravely under researched in a severely affected nation like India. The literature concerning civil unrest and insurgency in the country offers little understanding on how to effectively reduce the impact of civil unrest on children, prevent it altogether and safeguard their right to education,

thereby ensuring their effective access to educational institutions. In the field visits conducted by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) to the *Naxal* insurgency affected States in India, it has been seen that in areas of civil unrest children are the worst hit when left without adult protection as well as institutional care and support. Separation from parents during conflict and death of the caregivers during strife and insurgency make children the most vulnerable and their rights are the first to be compromised totally.

Consequently, this paper attempted to find out the means to effectively reduce the impact of civil unrest on children, prevent it altogether and safeguard their right to education. In doing so, it explored (a) the involvement of community in the functioning of educational institutions to ensure that no child was left behind and out of the purview of education, and (b) the role of youth in mobilizing the community and the government to translate emergency relief in to education. This was addressed through:

- (i) review and analysis of the work of 100 youths, from low socioeconomic backgrounds from civil unrest affected States, in tracking children, negotiating with their parents, community, teachers and *Naxals*, and bringing them back to school;
 - a. study of the impact of this work on the access of children to their fundamental right to education; and
 - b. exploring the means for institutionalizing, replicating and scaling this work to benefit all children throughout the country by informing the policies, schemes and programmes of the Government of India.

Positive Deviance

The objective of the paper was to understand if the involvement of community and local government bodies through youth participation and mobilization facilitated in harmonizing societies affected by civil unrest by making a claim for education and child rights. It sought to establish that these youths act as a bridge/link between the children and the institutions and work towards reducing the impact of civil unrest on children, preventing it altogether and safeguarding their right to education. They do not set up parallel structures and instead pressurize the State to provide children their basic rights and entitlements. There is no mindless criticism of the State and constant efforts are made to ensure that the government and the community participate as friends in the process of development of children and not as adversaries.

As a result, rather than documenting the barriers to access of children to education, uncommon but successful interventions to ensure access were analyzed using the positive deviance approach. This approach was pioneered by Zeitlin in nutrition research in the early 1990's (Zeitlin 1991) and has since been successfully employed to address other issues such as health care and maternal mortality.

Methodology

The research focused on qualitative analysis and employed a case-study method to enable the youths to divulge the enabling factors and successful interventions associated with the functioning of educational institutions in the country, particularly in areas affected by civil unrest and insurgency, and how these helped overcome the barriers in accessing the right to education.

This further aided and facilitated the review and analysis of the work of the youths and study of its impact on children's access to education. Existence of educational institutions, involvement of the community in their functioning, location and outreach of these institutions, presence of basic infrastructure (or lack thereof) and so on are the determining factors which were rigorously examined using a qualitative method, given the multiplicity of these factors identified in the child rights discourse.

For instance, according to NFHS-3 school attendance in rural areas was 37% while in the urban areas it was 51%. Presence of basic infrastructure such as trained teachers, classrooms, furniture, functional toilets, drinking water, boundary wall, etc. critically impact educational access of children. In all of its field visits, the NCPCR found that children, especially girls, dropped out of schools due to lack of functional toilets and boundary walls. Further, recent research by the NCPCR (2011; 2012) has shown that the current infrastructure of schools and hostels can only function without any wastage if a groundswell for community involvement and participation is created. This further leads to zero tolerance for children out of school and an urgent need to bring children back to school, revive closed down and non-functional schools and to run these schools to full capacity.

Qualitative Component

The qualitative analysis has documented by use of key informant interviews and focused group discussions the role and importance of youth involvement in effective functioning of educational institutions. This helped examine the *impact* of youth involvement on community mobilization and participation towards effective functioning of public institutions such as schools, thereby ensuring access of children to the same, in civil-unrest affected four blocks of four districts in the State of Bihar. The blocks were selected on the basis of their size, population, language and the severity of unrest.

The qualitative component also included the following in order to gauge the improvement (or deterioration) in the functioning of educational institutions and increase (or decrease) in the number of children accessing these:

- number of schools (ashram shalas, residential bridge course centres, hostels, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas) revived/reopened/strengthened due to the efforts of the youths and the community;
- number and profile of children brought back to school and readmitted/reenrolled;
- number of teachers reinstated/appointed to teacher-less schools; and
- details (profile) of missing children, migrant children and children married and sent to other villages/Panchayats/States.

II. Areas of Civil Unrest – Issues and Interventions

Context

In the recent years, civil unrest in India has taken an unlikely turn and slowly begun to involve women and children in the conflict in ways more than one. These two vulnerable groups are left exposed during an insurgency and their rights, which ideally should be the best protected, are the first to be violated due to the absence of institutional frameworks which could translate State schemes, policies, and programs in to emergency relief. Further, the States affected by unrest in the country are also areas with difficult terrain (hills; dense forests; rivers), are difficult to reach, have poor connectivity and accessibility with the rest of the country, and have inevitably become grey zones facing State deficit. There is limited or zero presence of administrative authorities in such areas and unwillingness on part of the government to put the rights of children first. The issues of law and order and security are given top priority, compromising the rights of women and children. Even when denial or violation of rights is addressed, the rights of children are often clubbed with the rights of women (mothers) and thus their specific needs and entitlements remain unaddressed. (NCPCR, 2011; 2012; 2013)

Displacement of families, forced migration, separation, and loss of livelihoods bring to halt the services meant for children and hamper the enjoyment of their rights, especially the right to education. Schools and hostels are often the only *pucca* structures (concrete buildings) found in the remotest of areas in the country. Thus occupying these buildings or destroying them undermines the State authority. Destruction of these structures, which are meant to act as safe havens for these children, in the violence by militant or armed forces scars an entire generation of children. In the absence of any institutional framework and emergency relief for them, children increasingly face the risk of joining the workforce since they provide cheap labor, migrating to other States, being recruited by one of the militant organizations, and trafficked and/or sold. Beyond doubt, extraordinary efforts going beyond routine responses are seen as necessary leading to emergency relief for children. However, this emergency relief is seldom perceived as and provided in the form of “education”. The importance of schools, residential hostels, and other educational institutions is undermined by concerns of survival and these institutions are converted in to relief camps, bringing to an abrupt halt the process of education.

Routine of Children in Areas of Civil Unrest

Children affected by unrest lead a precarious life and become a marginalized group, unable to realize their fullest potential. In the absence of safe institutions for them such schools and hostels, they are forced to lead unsafe and often illegal lives. Pushed out of school and *anganwadi* centre (AWC) these children become available for the labour force and other illegal activities. They join the informal, unskilled or casual workforce where they are rendered invisible and out of the purview of State policies and programs. In India, the RTE Act, 2009 is only applicable to children in the 6-14 age group and children in the 0-6 and 14-18 age groups have no legal or constitutional guarantees for education. Similarly, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (CLPRA) 1986 prohibits employment of children only in the 6-14 age group and permits the employment of children in non-hazardous occupations in the 14-18 age group. This limited scope and intent of legislative framework in the country reflects the State’s inability to plan for all children and take a rights-based approach.

As a result, out of the 100 million children in 14-18 age group in India, 32 million are employed in the workforce (Census 2001). They work in farms in their villages; in brick kilns, mines and quarries, sweat shops, and construction sites as migrant labour; are trafficked to work as domestic labour in cities; or sold for sex work and substance abuse. Instead of going through a sturdy process of education through schools, very sizeable numbers of Indian children have been forced into a routine of drudgery and suffering at the cost of realizing their fullest potential. They are gradually edged out of active participation in any production process and economic activity that involves skills and have no claim to any system of security or insurance and thus are unable to take advantage of State programs and policies as well as market interventions. This further perpetuates and transmits destitution and helplessness and leads to the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Ultimately their fate is sealed by their lack of access to education (S. Sinha; G. Wadhwa, 2013).

The *Bal Bandhu* Model

To counter this, the NCPCR initiated a pilot program for protection of rights of children, called the *Bal Bandhu* (friends of children) Scheme, in five civil unrest affected States wherein 200 youths were identified from within the affected communities and employed to work for child rights through community mobilization. These youths (called *Bal Bandhus*) were heroes themselves – they had managed to reach secondary and higher education by overcoming the barriers to access and were an inspiration for the community. The objective of the Scheme was to de-link the issue of protection of rights of children from the violence and unrest in the affected States, mobilize communities to take responsibility of their children by giving them confidence to access the child centric institutions, interact with the government at the local level (block and district) to respond to the demands of the communities, and finally to ensure that children enjoy all their rights and entitlements including the right to education, health and nutrition, protection etc.

District	Block
Bihar	
East Champaran	Patahi Block
Rohtas	Rohtas Block
Jamui	Khaira Block
Sheohar	Tariyani Block
Assam	
Chirang	Sidli Block
Kokrajhar	Kachugaon Block
Andhra Pradesh	
Khammam	Cherla Block
Maharashtra	
Gadchiroli	Dhanora Block
Chhattisgarh	
Sukma	Sukma Block

However, slowly it was realized that these youths were not only mobilizing community and creating a groundswell for children's education, they also took upon themselves to track each and every child in their village, bring her back to school, ensure functionality of that school by negotiating with the military and the *Naxals*, ensure retention of these children and monitor their progress. Alongside, they delivered vaccinations to the pregnant women, got pensions to the elderly and formed child rights forums and committees. Most importantly, they assumed a twofold responsibility – while they built a momentum for the community to raise demands for children's education, they pressurized the local governments to respond to these demands effectively. But their "role" remained largely un-documented, as has been the case of most of the best performing youth interventions in the country which lack the evidence of youth responses in terms of research and documentation. What thus began as an experiment had the potential for turning into a successful model for the rest of the country to emulate; given it was not a pilot program for a period of three years beginning 2010.

Routine and Activities of Bal Bandhus

It was recognized that the *Bal Bandhus* were working in extremely difficult circumstances and it was challenging to get people together under such tense conditions. All these were difficult areas to work in, not because of the unrest alone, but because these were remote areas with little/no public transport, minimal power supply and large areas of abject poverty. Also, migration had happened on a large scale from these districts, and many schools, AWCs had become dysfunctional. However, in the midst of such adverse circumstances, the *bal bandhus* not just revived institutions, they also engaged the community and the officials to work towards children and their concerns. *Bal Bandhus* acted as eyes and ears of the government. Despite obstacles they did not let their daily work suffer, ensured that children went to school and AWCs and the process of creating a groundswell with respect to child rights gained momentum. They conveyed that their work required a significant amount of love and patience. Their presence, since they were from within the respective village they worked in, positively influenced the attitude of many towards children and the issue of child rights. The following is the gist of activities under the *Bal Bandhu* program:

- Conducting household survey in *gram panchayats* in affected block of all children in the 0-18 year age group.
- Monitoring enrolment of children in school, bringing children back to school, verifying attendance as well as absenteeism with the help of the community, petitioning for reinstating subject-wise teachers in schools, and attending block level trainings as well as orientations.
- Visiting schools regularly and getting involved in various activities of children such as games, music, dance etc to develop a bond with them.
- Visiting the parents of out of school children and motivating them to send the child back to school as well as to send the younger children to AWCs.
- Training of *gram panchayats* on the provisions of the RTE Act.
- Formation of *Bal* and *Balika Adhikar Suraksha Samiti* (Child Rights Protection Forums) and encouraging these to make regular petitions on several matters concerning children and their rights.

- Assessment of the functioning of *ashram shalas* (schools for children from tribal communities) and Residential Bridge Course camps with support from community and through interaction with the functionaries.
- Meeting and working with the health workers and functionaries at the village level.
- Helping the elderly get their pensions.

Bihar

Rohtas – District Profile

Rohtas is one of the top ten districts in the country affected by civil unrest (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India). Areas such as Rohtasgarh have a difficult terrain and are covered by thick forests. Most of the villages in and around the area, especially on the uphill, could be accessed only by foot and this explained the lack of government intervention in the area. Villages like Nagatoli and Budhwa were inaccessible and therefore the block and district administration was seldom able to intervene in these areas. Children's right to health and education was endangered in this Panchayat. For instance, in Kachuar Primary School, there were 92 students while in the Kachuar Middle School there were 111 students. However, both the schools were located on the hill and teacher absenteeism was a major concern. In Tardi, there was no provision for the education of girls.

25 youths who worked as *Bal Bandhus* and members of youth groups in Rohtas and Khaira blocks each of Rohtas and Jamui districts respectively were interviewed. They started their work at the village level by sensitizing and mobilizing the community. They made sure that children were regularly attending schools so they could learn consistently. Gradually, they formed *Mahila* (women's) groups and youth groups.

In the beginning everyone was skeptical about their work. There was a prevalent belief that the government makes schemes and leaves. There was no implementation of these schemes. Teachers charged money for transfer certificates, enrolment, admissions, Independence Day celebrations etc. The *Bal Bandhus* involved the *Mukhiya* (village head) and held a meeting with the teachers. Thereafter, the teachers returned the money to the children. This was their first exercise in trust and confidence building of the community.

Slowly, with the help of rallies, *nukkad natak* (street plays), and awareness campaigns the *Bal Bandhus* managed to garner support from the community and achieve clarity on the objectives of the *Bal Bandhu* scheme. This also led to the creation of demands by the *Panchayat* leaders and members and all the *gram panchayats* in the block were receptive and responsive to the program. In a recent campaign organized by the *Bal Bandhus* in the block, 15,000 persons participated and helped spread the message for protection of children's rights.

Status of schools and AWCs in Rohtas Block

Middle School Rasulpur, Telcup Gram Panchayat – Public Hearing

All those close to the children – parents, teachers and other community members – were present in the hearing held at Telcup gram panchayat. The participants also included Panchayat members, ward members, members of *Bal Mitra Sangathan* (child friendly groups), *Bal Bandhus* and social workers. The *panchayat Mukhiya* shared that the *Bal Bandhu* scheme had created a difference and changed the mindsets of people since the *Bal Bandhus* had managed to reach every household. The *gram panchayat* had a population of 6000 and due to rampant poverty and economic problems, literacy had taken a backseat. Children worked in nearby forests, collecting and selling *lakdi* (wood) for *datun* and other products. There were 6 brick kilns in Telcup and no provision for children who came there with their parents who worked. These children spent 9-10 months in these brick kilns and had no provision for health and education.

The community members, however, unanimously expressed that the door to door survey of the *Bal Bandhus* had significantly helped in creating awareness and sensitizing the Panchayat about children's rights. The schemes and entitlements for children, which even the parents were not aware of, were now being availed by them. The program had created spaces for children and their parents to express themselves. For instance, a young girl who had dropped out of school after class 8 due to her father being unwell joined the rally/campaign organized by the *Bal Bandhus* and got a chance to share her experience with everyone.

Samhota Gram Panchayat

An interaction with the community members of Samhota showed the concern for children and their education amongst the villagers. The *Mukhiya* revealed that there were 3 schools and 7 AWCs in the Panchayat and it was a model Panchayat with regard to the functioning of these institutions. However, it was communicated that the pupil teacher ratio was skewed as there were 6 teachers for 600 students. The Panchayat had appointed volunteers to teach children and was paying them salaries. Teacher requirement was noted to be a pressing concern in almost all the schools across the State.

The representatives of Baknora gram Panchayat present during the interaction divulged that provision of safe drinking water was problematic in the area due to its proximity to the limestone factories. Provision of mid-day meal was also found to be an issue in this Panchayat.

Visit to Middle School Tardi, Rohtasgarh Gram Panchayat

The middle school in Tardi presented a brighter picture of the schools in the area. It had proper classrooms and furniture and children from nearby villages came to attend classes. An RBC for boys was also running in the school. However, there was a shortage of rooms and 2 to 3 classes had to be combined and taken together due to lack of space. The school was located next to a stream and it became risky for children coming from distant villages during rains. An interaction with the school students disclosed that there was a demand for regular teachers, activity teachers as well as computers in the school. It was also pointed out that there was no high school in the

vicinity and children had to travel for 3 hours to attend the nearest high school. There was also no RBC for girls.

In the KGBV in Rohtasgarh GP where 32 girls were studying, there was a requirement for teachers. The girls also demanded activity teachers, since they wanted to practice dance and music, computers as well as sports material. The school had no boundary wall and safety of these girls was at stake. Two female Bal Bandhus were staying with these girls to ensure they were safe at night, due to the absence of a warden. There was no appropriate bedding for the girls as well. All of the girls present during the interaction expressed a desire to study further and wanted a conducive environment for the same.

The Panchayat members of Rohtasgarh expressed a lack of education in the area and attributed the same to the shortage of teachers and absence of hostels/residential facilities for girls. They also complained of teachers subletting their contracts in most of the schools in Rohtasgarh and delay in the appointment of teachers in the State of Bihar.

Provision of health services was found to be very problematic in the Panchayat. Due to a difficult terrain and absence of a sub health centre there was an urgent need to hold regular health camps and have mobile health clinics in the area. The nearest primary health centre (PHC) was in Rohtas which was quite a distance for the community to travel.

Jamui – Profile of the District

Gram panchayats in Jamui such as Garhi and Goli were difficult to access and as a result had not witnessed significant government intervention. Goli Panchayat shares its borders with the State of Jharkhand, is heavily forested and Naxal affected, has no roads and thus no mode of conveyance for the community. Children worked in forests or migrated to other States due to lack of provisions for them. Health and education situation was dismal in the area.

The district had very few arrangements for the education of girls. There was no RBC for them, as in Bela Panchayat, and enrolment in high school was very problematic, such as in Garhi Panchayat. As a result, girls were engaged in *bidi* making, and worked in forests and farms. Many girls dropped out of school due to non-functional toilets and non-provision of water in the school. The *Bal Bandhus* were increasingly working towards this end through community mobilization, thereby leading to creation of demands by the community for health and educational institutions, and bridging the gap between administration and community such that the government can adequately respond to these demands.

Status of schools and AWCs in Khaira Block

Visit to Middle School Khaira

In the middle school Khaira over 200 children were present. However, after analyzing the attendance register of class 7, it was observed that there was a high rate of absenteeism in school in the month of November since only 20 out of 78 children were usually present. It was informed that children worked in farms with their parents during these months and hence missed school for many days altogether. Further, an interaction with the students of class 7 and 8 revealed that there was no uniform for boys in these classes, scholarship money was not being appropriately

used, toilets were not functional and there was no electricity in the school. The students also demanded sports material, computers as well as regular picnics/exposure visits for them.

Visit to Bhujayat Village, Goli Panchayat

The AWC in Bhujayat village was open and fully functional on the day the visit was made. The parents however disclosed that usually the centre was seldom open and there were irregularities in the provision of supplementary nutrition to children. The quality of nutrition was also not found to be good. Similarly, in the middle school in Bhujayat the children complained about the provision of mid day meal. They informed that the quality of food served was not good and the provision was irregular. The cook informed that her and her helper's salary had not been paid for a year and the ration was irregular.

There were a large number of complaints against the school Headmaster (HM), accusing him of being irregular in attending school and embezzling funds meant for development of school infrastructure. There was a shortage of classrooms and 3 classes had to be taken together in one room. The construction of new rooms had been stopped due to the absence of the HM and missing of funds. The students seemed happy with their teachers but were upset about the non-distribution of uniforms, scholarships and books.

Garhi Panchayat – Community Meeting

In the middle school in Garhi, an interaction was held with the students. It was informed that they had not been served the mid day meal since 3 months. The uniforms were not being distributed and the toilets could not be used by the students. The community members reiterated these issues during the interaction held at Panchayat Bhavan (village hall) in Garhi. They emphasized that health and nutrition facilities in and around the area were non-existent as the AWCs did not function most of the days and there were no doctors in the government hospitals.

With regard to the status of education, there was a pressing need to open a high school in the Panchayat. The community members suggested frequent physical verifications by the block and district officials to ensure proper functioning of institutions. They also requested that a circular be sent by the district administration to the school principals, HMs and teachers directing them to announce entitlements of children such as scholarships, uniform money, mid day meal money etc.

During the community meeting with the District and Block officials it was found that not one of the members raised any other issues of concern that they had and were focused on impeccable functioning of schools, AWCs and other institutions for children by the government. All of them unanimously expressed their concern towards health and education of their children. They felt that government alone could make provision of basic amenities such as food, uniform, furniture, toilet etc and such a faith was indeed inspiring to compel the authorities to provide children with their basic rights and entitlements.

Interventions

In Tardi, children tended cattle and collected wood from the forests to sell in the markets. The *Bal Bandhus* found that children were enrolled in school but not attending the same. They motivated these children to go to school and due to this the number of children attending school in Tardi rose significantly. In the 11-14 age group there were 50 students who had never been to school. These children were admitted to the RBC. To tackle teacher absenteeism, a meeting was held with the *Mukhiya* of the village of all teachers and therefore the teachers started attending the school regularly.

In Rohtasgarh, the pupil teacher ratio (PTR) was severely skewed. The school timing was erratic and teachers were irregular. However, after *Bal Bandhus* held consistent meetings with the teachers, they gradually started coming on time and schools started opening timely.

In many villages in Khaira block in Jamui, the *Bal Bandhus* personally ensured that children attended school. For instance, they helped a severely sick girl to resume schooling and similarly motivated a young girl, who had dropped out of school due to her unwell father, to go back to school. In Dungarkola, the *Bal Bandhus* helped enroll 547 children in school and monitored their attendance. 400 children were found to be regularly attending school.

In certain pockets in Khaira, the *Bal Bandhus* ensured the cleanliness of the vicinity and hygiene of the children. After a lot of struggle and a long intervention, parents started sending their children to school in a proper manner and uniforms. They started bathing them and dressing them appropriately for school. The *Bal Bandhus* worked very hard to this end despite criticisms from the teachers, school authorities and often parents.

In problematic panchayats such Goli and Garhi, the *Bal Bandhus* identified and rescued child labour, listed out children migrating to other States and mapped out schools with issues. They shared this information with the administration and helped it carry forward the task of protection of children's rights.

It was therefore observed that there was an explosive demand for education by parents and children themselves and they were willing to make tremendous sacrifices to access institutions meant for them. The visit to these areas was made with the assumption that the *Naxals* (Maoists) did not allow these institutions to function or disrupted their regular functioning. However, this was proven wrong. The schools, hostels and AWCs in these areas did not function because they never opened. The school teachers were either absent, on leave, or not appointed owing to State carelessness or sometimes on the pretext of their security, given that these areas were marred by unrest. Same was the case with anganwadi workers and helpers. Thus the presence of *bal bandhus* was a game-changer! They proved these assumptions wrong, motivated and mobilized the communities by holding innumerable meetings, conducted household surveys, tracked every child in the village, and thereby created a groundswell of demands for child centric institutions, especially schools, hostels, RBCs, ashram shalas, and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs).

East Champaran – Profile of the District

There are nearly 40,000 children in the district of East Champaran who were out of school as per the data collected by the Education Department in September 2010. There are 27 blocks, 26 KGBVs (one per block; one to be opened) and 26 RBCs. A household survey is done every 3 years in the 0-4 age group and data is compiled accordingly. SSA officials informed that uniforms as well notebooks and textbooks were provided to children from class 1 to 8. Provision of cycles to both boys and girls in all government schools had led to a significant change as children could now be seen visiting banks and post offices.

However, the *Bal Bandhus* divulged that headmasters charged money from students for admission and there were problems of casteism, demand for certificates etc with regard to admission in schools. Children therefore were unable to attend school due to these reasons. Those children who started attending school were often not enrolled or registered for want of fees by the teachers and were constantly dissuaded by the teachers from attending school. There was also a dire need of RBC schools in the block as there were close to 3000 children ready to go to school but no facility to bridge them to an age-appropriate class. The *bal bandhus* suggested that instead of building new RBCs, additional RBCs could be set up within existing schools or non-residential bridge courses could be set up within regular schools. The *bal bandhus* conveyed that it took them over 15 days to a month to get children back to school and they did not want this motivation to go to waste. *Bal Mitra* and *Bal Mahila Mitra Sangathan* (child and girl friendly groups) had been formed in the panchayats to this end.

During the visit to both the districts of East Chamapran and Sheohar, where 25 youths each working as bal bandhus and members of child friendly groups were interviewed, the issues witnessed were similar to a considerable extent. A significant number of children (6-14 years) were out of school and engaged in some form of work or other. Younger children had to be left alone at home if parents went to work due to non-functional aanganwadi centres (AWCs).

Status of schools and AWCs in Patahi Block, East Champaran District

Bhagwanpur Village, Barashankar Panchayat – Public Hearing

The *Bal Bandhus* shared that children in the village mainly used to work in farms and it was after many rounds of interactions with the parents and due to the motivation given to children a positive response had been received from the community and children were now going to school. There were 307 out-of-school children in the Panchayat and 27 out-of-school children in the *tola* (hamlet). Noorjahan, a member of the *Bal Mitra Sangathan*, shared that a lot of improvement could be witnessed post the implementation of the scheme. Teachers had started coming to school regularly and children were now provided with dishes other than *khichdi* such as *daal bhaat* etc for their mid-day meal. However, there were 27 children out-of-school because there was still no school in the *tola* and the nearest school was 2 km away.

On the other hand, a few parents revealed that the scholarship money was not reaching children and while the school is till class 8, there were only 2 *bhavans* with no space and no separate classrooms. Mid-day meals were stored and served in that same space. A representative of the

Mahadalit (lower caste) *tola* revealed that the school in his area charged money for admission, the Headmaster was never present in the school, teachers were irregular, mid-day meal was not served daily and children were reprimanded if they complained against the school authorities. In a nearby school it was found that there was a severe lack of space and classrooms as children belonging to different age groups and classes were made to sit together. An interaction with the parents, especially mothers, brought to light the fact that many children were denied school and many others dropped out due to non-provision of uniforms, scholarships, mid-day meal, and books, and not due to the civil unrest in the area. A large number of girls were seen to be out of school.

Champapur Village – Community Meeting

In a Sanskrit school in Champapur village, the issues raised were similar. Girl students shared that there was no provisioning of mid-day meal, uniforms and cycles, no other subjects are taught in the school and corporal punishment was rampant.

An interaction with the community members showed the concern for children and their education amongst the villagers. Chunchun Singh, a member of the community, shared that there were 1166 children in school while only 8 teachers. There was no science or math teacher and those who came were irregular. He suggested that the teachers who were doing well should be rewarded and others reprimanded. There should be a mechanism to interact with the concerned government officials directly and the middle men should be done away with. This would bring about greater transparency in governance as presently the funds for the Panchayat disappeared. Teachers and members of *Yuva Bal Mitra Sangathan* (youth groups) also shared about how they have been creating awareness on the abovementioned issues. They had brought 182 children to school but since these children were mocked in the classroom, there was a need for RBCs.

Visit to Miagachi Village, Bokatikhal Gram Panchayat

Chitrlekha, a member of the *Bal Mitra Sangathan*, communicated that there was no discipline in this school, children used to fight amongst themselves and eventually stopped attending school. Teachers blamed the parents for not cleaning and dressing their children appropriately while parents blamed them for not paying attention in the class and often not admitting children to school. There were no separate classes and all the students used to sit together. It was after a lot of struggle and a month's intervention by the *bal bandhus* that separate classrooms were built, parents sent their children to school in a proper manner and the teachers started taking keen interest in class. The *Bal Bandhus* worked immensely hard to this end despite criticisms from the teachers, school authorities and parents.

Status of schools and AWCs in Tariyani Block, Sheohar District

Kortha Village, Kurupatti Gram Panchayat – Public Hearing

Members of the *Bal Mitra Sangathan* revealed that AWC no. 44 had no worker but only a helper. The conditions of the schools were no better as the *Bal Bandhus* were bringing children, engaged in labour, back to school but there was a lack of teachers in general and trained teachers in specific. The guardians joined the *Bal Bandhus* and shared that either the teachers were absent or

engaged in other activities in school while the students created a ruckus. There were 596 students enrolled in the nearest school out of which only 400 attended, with 8 teachers. There were complaints about the lack of trained teachers. The *Mukhiya* of the village reiterated the facts shared by the *Bal Bandhus* and also added that no *khichdi* (mid-day meal) was being served in the school.

The Navaragaon Panchayat Sarpanch cited that the amount of development that should take place in his village is not happening owing to a significant level of corruption. The *paushtik ahar* (supplementary nutrition) is not reaching the AWCs and there is no administrative support from the government.

The students of Rajkiya Urdu Matth Vidyalaya (State Urdu Medium School) unanimously stated that they had never been given uniform by the school authorities. They were aware that the uniform money for the current academic session had reached the authorities but was not being distributed to the students. The students were made to sweep the floor of the school on a daily basis. There was no proper seating or furniture in the school and the students were made to sit on the floor, without electricity. The school had no boundary wall and students were free to wander around. The Headmaster was not present in the school. The students complained that the teachers were irregular and the quality of mid day meal was poor. The AWC visited was in a deplorable condition. It was located in a small house and had no provisions.

Key Issues presented

1. **Enrollment in schools** remains a problem – children who have never been to school are either refused admission by the authorities or are discouraged to attend school by the teachers. For instance, out of 1499 students enrolled in a particular school, only 300 were found to be attending regularly. Teachers, even Headmasters, have often also been accused of charging money for admission, demanding certificates and casteism. In other instances, children who were motivated by *Bal Bandhus* to attend school and were doing so regularly, were not enrolled by the teachers. Thus there is an urgent need for schools with Residential Bridge Courses (RBCs). One kilometer norm is also not being applied in a lot of places and students have to travel for more than two kilometers to attend the nearest school.
2. *Bal Bandhus* are adding children to schools but there is a **lack of teachers** as well as classrooms and adequate infrastructure. In all the schools visited, there was a dire need of trained teachers for subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science. Notebooks, textbooks, and uniforms are not being given to students. There are schools where the uniform and scholarship money has reached the authorities but has not been distributed to children. Children are made to sit on the ground, often in one overcrowded room, and without electricity. Toilets are either inexistent or non-functional and children are themselves in-charge of cleaning the school premises. One school did not have a boundary wall and students were free to roam around.
3. While there was no provision of **mid day meal** in one school, it was reported by the community members that the meal provided in another school could not be consumed by children, and they preferred eating outside than in school. However, there was one school

where improvement was made and students were fed a variety of food, other than the regular *khichdi*, everyday.

4. An interaction with the students of all the schools visited revealed an alarming incidence of **corporal punishment**.
5. **Disabled children** still face a challenge since there are no special provisions for them to attend school.
6. Aanganwadi centres are either non-functional or in a pitiable state and there is no CDPO (Child Development Project Officer). An AWC had a helper but not the aanganwadi worker.
7. *Bal Bandhus* have often been threatened by the teachers for creating awareness on issues pertaining to child rights and apparently turning children and their families against them.

Interventions

Interestingly, the *bal bandhus* mobilized the communities in areas of civil unrest not to bring out faults in the government machinery or gaps and issues, but to instill confidence in the parents and children to access institutions meant for them. It was to strengthen democracy and create democratic spaces at the local level for the communities exercise their rights. It was also an effort to ensure that the village bodies (*gram panchayats*) took responsibility of their children and felt an onus to bring these children out of labour, back from other States, and send them to schools or AWCs. It was only after these institutions were accessed by the local bodies, parents, children, and communities that the gaps were pointed out to the local governments and administrative authorities in the most non-adversarial ways possible.

Thus on one hand *bal bandhus* motivated children in order to bring them back to school, formed Bal Mitra Sangathan/Committees (child friendly groups), completed household survey in the block, interacted with the parents and Panchayat Samiti in order to persuade them to send children to school, and visited farms and other areas where children worked as labourers. On the other hand, they held regular meetings with the district and block level officers, informed them of the issues at the grassroots, and enabled them to respond better to the demands of the communities.

They also adopted noteworthy strategies to involve both the communities and the government in the process of protection and promotion of child rights. For instance, the *Bal Bandhus* presented *badhai patra* (congratulatory note) as well as *shapath patra* (oath against child labour and violation of child rights) to the winners of the Panchayat elections (in Patahi). These notes were well received by the village heads and ensured their commitment to child rights.

Instead of ringing the bell inside school premises, the teachers in Tariyani block chose a more encouraging and innovative way to call children to school. They reached half an hour before school hours, carried the bell to the village and rang it to ensure every child came to school! As a result, 185 children of the enrolled 223 children began attending school regularly, as opposed to the poor attendance of 16 earlier!

A *tola* (hamlet) was visited everyday by the *Bal Bandhus* in order to check on schools as well as on the attendance of children enrolled by them. Owing to these repeated visits, the schools and other authorities were now forthcoming.

It was disclosed that no attention was being paid to AWCs and as a result children lost interest and stopped visiting these centres. The Child Welfare Department office as well as the CDPO office were closed and reopened only after repeated efforts by the *Bal Bandhus*. The *Bal Bandhus* then also conducted a house to house survey to ensure that women received vaccination.

The most interesting fact about Patahi block was that the *bal bandhus* prepared 18 registers to ensure that every child was tracked in the 15 panchayats where the Scheme was functional! These registers were regularly maintained by the headmasters and the *bal bandhus*:

- i. For complaints concerning schools and anganwadi centres.
- ii. For children going to anganwadi centres (AWCs).
- iii. For pregnant and nursing mothers
- iv. Containing details of children who have continued with their education after finishing classes 5th and 8th.
- v. Containing details of children **not** going to school and children with disability/special needs.
- vi. Containing details of children in the panchayat who are presently studying in classes 5 and 8.
- vii. For '*baal sansad*' (children's parliament) and '*meena manch*'.
- viii. For bal mitra and women mitra groups.
- ix. Containing details of children enrolled.
- x. Containing details of children with malnutrition and severe malnutrition.
- xi. Containing details of children who dropped out of school after finishing classes 5, 6, 7 and 8.
- xii. Containing details of children **not** going to anganwadi centres.
- xiii. For children between the ages of 0 to 6 years in the panchayats.
- xiv. Containing details of children studying in classes 1 to 8, in all schools of the panchayats.
- xv. For weekly visits to the model school.
- xvi. Containing details of children studying outside the panchayat.
- xvii. For follow-up of children (who have been long absentees).
- xviii. Containing details of meetings conducted. *pe a quote from the document or the summary of an interesting point.*

III.Achievements

No.	Activities	Dec 2010- March 2012
1	Gram Panchayats contacted	212
2	Community Meetings held	4787
3	Meeting held with Block Level Officials	155
4	Meeting held with District Level Officials	104
5	Children enrolled in School	14889
6	Schools made functional	963
7	Aanganwadi Centres made functional	931
8	Children enrolled in Ashramshalas/RBCs/KGBV	2497
9	Schools vacated by police/armed forces	7
10	Children contacted for support during final exams	13257
11	Children tracked and restored to families	400
12	Rallies, Marches held	389
13	Orientation on RTE	861

IV. Success Stories

Closure of Ashram School in Kamangad- Dhanora Block, Gadchiroli District, Maharashtra

The aided ashram school in Kamangad village of Dhanora taluka (block) was being run by a private trust since December 1992 and classes were being held till class 10 with nearly 363 children attending the school. It was in 2009 that the situation of the school deteriorated and a show cause notice was served to the school management by the Tribal Development Department for not providing basic facilities to its students. The management could not provide food as well as proper hostel facilities to the students and therefore the school could not reopen for the academic session of June-July 2011.

The trust was given permission by the Government of Maharashtra to close the ashramshala at Kamangad and shift it to Kurkheda, a village nearly 100 km away from Kamangad, since 1 July 2011. The gram panchayat at Kamangad passed a resolution against shifting of the ashramshala to Kurkheda and for its continuance in the same village. The community too had been protesting the shifting of the school 100 km away from the village since it would have become very inconvenient and impractical for children to go that far. Also, children not only from Kamangad but also from nearby villages attended this ashram school and these areas were dominated by the tribal population, thereby making an ashram school in the area essential. In spite of appeals made by the gram panchayat and the community, the ashram school was allowed to be closed in Kamangad.

It was found that all children who had been pushed out of this school were working as agricultural labourers and on the verge of going into other dangerous paths. It was also found that the parents in Kamangad and all the surrounding villages were anxious about their children's education and each one of them voiced the importance of education for tribal children.

There were two school teachers who persisted in continuing the school and thus about 80 children from Kamangad and neighboring villages attended the school. These school teachers were never paid their salaries by the trust for 3 years and in spite of it they had not given up on teaching children.

During a public hearing with the District and State officials, it was found that not one of the community members present raised any other issues of concern that they had and only focused on reopening of the school by the government. All of them unanimously expressed that the closed down ashram school in Kamangad village should be taken over by the government and revived immediately. Since the school had been shut since the beginning of this session, children had not been able to study and were working as agricultural labourers in fields. Interestingly, the villagers had donated the land for school as well as given grains for food to the school administration during crisis.

The parents and guardians of the children, especially mothers, reiterated that they won't send their children to school if it is shifted 100 km away from Kamangad to Kurkheda. They all wanted the government to take over this school. An old grandparent conveyed that 3 of his grandchildren had passed out from this school and 3 others were still enrolled and waiting for their education to be completed. He described the present condition of the school as pitiable. He

also exposed that 5 students from the school have been abducted by the management, perhaps to Kurkeda and their whereabouts are still not known.

The school alumni revealed that the school has good teachers and should be reopened in its present premises. A Panchayat Samiti member expressed that this ashram school has led to the development of not only children but also of their families. Earlier children as well as their parents could speak only the *Gondi* language, but now they can also speak *Marathi*. The students of the school were saddened by its closure and the girls from class 10 disclosed that they now work in fields for sowing and receive Rs 30 per day. They wanted to study and demanded that the school be reopened immediately. They made a plea that the school be taken over by the government.

The teachers working in the school for the past four years revealed that they had not been paid their salary for three years but they still continued to teach children despite the closure of the school.

The demand for the revival of the ashram school and for its takeover by the government was unanimous by the community. They felt that government alone would make provision of basic amenities such as food, uniform, furniture, toilet etc which the previous school administration failed to do. Such a faith in the government was indeed inspiring that could compel the authorities to provide school to these children. Education is now a fundamental right of all children in the country and has to be enjoyed by every child, everyday of her life.

Subsequent to this hearing it was informed that the school was brought under the control of the Department of Tribal Development, Government of Maharashtra and that the Tribal Development Inspector, Project Office Gadchiroli was given charge as Administrator under Ashram School guidelines Rule no. 2.5 (2) and 2.9 till the end of the academic year in order to prevent further damage to the education of tribal children.

“Community reposes faith in the Government”: *Bal Bandhus*, Sukma Block, Sukma District, Chhattisgarh

The security of teachers was cited as one of the reasons for closing down schools in the interiors of Sukma block and for shifting children to the schools in the exteriors. The *samiti* members divulged that the *guruji* (teacher) had a lot of respect in the panchayat and the entire panchayat ensured her/his security. For instance, in the Koyabekur *gram panchayat*, the teacher had to travel a long distance from either Konta or Kerlapal and inevitably got delayed to reach school. On finding this out, a house was built for him by the community members within 15 days and now he permanently stays there, doesn't leave even during holidays!

The *Bal Mitra Samiti Adhyaksh* of the Burdi GP shared about the water problem at the porta cabin school wherein children had to take their utensils to the nearby pond to wash. Also, no doctors were available in this panchayat and as a result children suffered. While there were seven PHCs near the *gram panchayat*, the doctors stayed there from only 10 am to 12 pm and left thereafter. Written complaints and petitions were given to the administration but no action had been taken. In one of the government hospitals, the doctor was found to be charging fees for the medicines on a false pretext. The *bal bandhus* informed the community about this malpractice, mobilized the panchayat and ensured that treatment and medicines were given free of cost.

The *bal bandhus* and the *samiti* members revealed an interesting fact – they asserted that the demand for replicating the *Bal Bandhu* program in other blocks in the district was slowly being raised by the community owing to the positive outcomes of the scheme. After consistent and repeated efforts, the parents, community, *sarpanchs* and the panchayat members had started responding and taking ownership of the provisions meant for their children in the block. The children were coming to schools and AWCs and sometimes due to the lack or absence of infrastructure dropping out and joining the workforce, raising serious questions about the response of the government. It was thus upon the State and the administration to timely and effectively respond and assure the community of action.

V. Policy Recommendations

A number of core areas of concern were found which require comprehensive strategies, strong, time-sensitive implementation plans and convergence of departments (such as Health, Education, Rural Development, Panchayati Raj, Tribal Welfare, among others) to ensure protection of rights of children and their families, along with successful implementation of schemes such as the *Bal Bandhu* Scheme. To this end, the State and District Administration should have taken support from the *Bal Bandhus* who were already working extensively at the grassroots level and acted as ‘eyes and ears’ of the government.

1. Role of local bodies¹

- Every *gram panchayat* should have a list of all children in the 0-18 years. They must also have knowledge of all the educational interventions that children could avail of as well as other child centric institutions in the block, district and State.
- The Shiksha Samitis (education councils/forums/committees), comprising the community members, should be involved in the functioning of the schools and AWCs.

2. Comprehensive data on all children

- A proper survey should be conducted to ascertain the number of children, with information regarding school-going children, out-of-school children, drop-outs, and child labourers as well as number of functional and non-functional AWCs, and children accessing AWCs.
- Similar information should also be collected for other vulnerable groups of children, such as handicapped children, who require special provisions to enable them to attend AWC or school.
- The local bodies should be involved in the collection of such data.
- The District Administration should comprehensively use this data in its planning.

3. Teacher Training/Orientation and RBCs

- A letter from the DEO (District Education Officer), explicitly stating the RTE Act as well as Rules, should be sent to all the schools and their Headmasters (HMs) and should be circulated amongst teachers. Training should also be organized for the HMs and teachers

¹In the *Bal Bandhu* program of the NCPDR in the areas of civil unrest, children are being tracked by the local community and *gram panchayats* and brought back from across States to their villages. They have shown that if trust and faith is reposed in the community they can take care of their children. After such children have come back to their families, getting support from the system for such children to enjoy their entitlement to education, health, nutrition has been a herculean task. (Annexure for details)

to orient them with the Act, in order to address the issues such as denial of admission to children and corporal punishment.

- Physical verifications should be conducted to find out the reasons for bogus enrolment in schools and new strategies need to be devised to ensure teacher regularity as well as retention.
- Since there is a large number of children who are out of school, either drop-outs or never been to school, an RBC centre should be set up per cluster where these children could be easily enrolled. Existing schools, with extra space and fewer students can also be converted into RBC centres by adding a floor or two to them.
- Non-residential bridge courses should be started within the regular schools.

4. Strengthening of School Infrastructure

- Students should be able to study all the subjects in school and their inability to do so should not be attributed to the lack of trained teachers. Trained and competent teachers for respective subjects should be appointed in schools suffering from a lack of teachers at the earliest possible instance.
- The DEO should regularly inspect the schools and enquire if the students have received the textbook, notebooks, uniform, scholarship money and other entitlements due to them and should report this information to the District Magistrate/Collector.
- Every school should be a child-friendly setting and should not lack basic infrastructure such as classrooms, tables, chairs, functional toilets (separate for girls and boys) and electricity. In overcrowded schools, a floor or more should be added to build classrooms and accommodate all students class-wise. Regular inspections and physical verifications should be made to ensure that children do not lose interest and drop out of school owing to any of the abovementioned reasons.
- One kilometer norm should be strictly adhered to and children should not be compelled to travel lengthy distances for education.

5. Provision of Hostels

- The training material being used in RBCs for special training of older students for age-appropriate class should be up to date to ensure complete bridging of gaps of the students.
- An assessment should be made regarding the demand for KGBVs and these should be opened as per the Centre's policy.
- Seasonal hostels should be provided for the children of migrant labour, such as those employed in brick kilns, and rehabilitation of rescued migrant child labour.

6. Review of AWCs

- A systematic assessment of all AWCs should be done in both the blocks to ensure that these centres function fully, provide nutritious and good quality food as well as pre-

school education to children and are not understaffed. CDPO as well as aanganwadi workers and helpers should be appointed wherever necessary.

- Defaulting AWC staff should be warned and strict treatment should be meted out to them in case of repeated complaints by the community.
- There should be a weekly Panchayat level review meeting with the AWW and the helper with regard to the functioning of the AWCs.
- Petitions regarding opening of new AWCs should be reviewed periodically as well as addressed. The non-functional AWCs should be reopened with immediate effect.

7. Review Mechanism

- Since the *Bal Bandhus* mapped out each and every child, household as well as *gram panchayat*, the District Administration should make use of their information in its planning. A review meeting should be held with the community members reassuring them of the progress of their petitions.
- A review meeting should be held at every level – Panchayat, Block and District – involving the Sarpanchs or Panchayat members and the concerned officials, whereby certain major issues can be presented from the community for the administration to take action.

8. Bal Bandhu

- The Bal Bandhu program should be extended and expanded to neighboring blocks to replicate the success of the scheme
- The State should help the bal bandhus complete their higher education and provide them with opportunities such as scholarships towards this end.

9. Others

- Trainings should be organized for Bal Mitra Sangathans involving teachers, aanganwadi workers and helpers, Panchayat members, ward members and other members from the community to orient and sensitize them on the various aspects of child rights.
- There is a major problem of *agents* in almost every Panchayat – children are picked up by certain agents and sent to cities such as Delhi, Mumbai etc to work as child labourers. Strict action should be taken against these agents.

VI. Conclusion

As evident from the *Bal Bandhu* program, the youths play a significant role in the strengthening and deepening of democracy in a country like India. They have created a cadre of young people who are willing to work for the development of the country through the processes of social mobilization. These youths mobilize the community, instill confidence to access institutions, point out the gaps in access, and act as a link to bridge these gaps through interactions with the governments. With regard to ensuring children's access to their fundamental right to education, these youths focus on creation of democratic spaces and a dialogue between the community and the government in a non-adversarial, non-confrontational, and a non-intimidating way. This further enables trust of the community in the system and faith in the workings of the government. The youths such as the *bal bandhus* have employed the child tracking systems in areas of conflict – one of the key objectives of the 12th five year Plan in India. They have called for and ensured multi-sectoral action – involvement and convergence of functionaries from every department from the local to State and National level. While children in areas of civil unrest face the risk of being recruited by *bal sanghas / bal morchas*, the *bal bandhus* have provided a compelling alternative in the form of access to schools and education. Such programs also help the governments in their perception management. There are no separate cadres of youths or youth volunteers which work exclusively for children and their access to rights and entitlements. Thus, creation of such a cadre by using the energies of the youths becomes important. Since the *Bal Bandhus* are youths from within the community where they work, they are able to win the trust and confidence of the parents, teachers, panchayat and ward members, and reach areas which otherwise remain inaccessible to the block and district administration, giving them certain credibility and advantage. The youths thus act as eyes and ears of the government and the administration and *facilitate* work in difficult, inaccessible areas, especially for ensuring access of children to their right to education.

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