

India Student Parliament Leads School Change¹

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In an August 2007 edition of the *Dhina Thanthi* newspaper in southern India, a story told of a parliament prime minister who discovered a disparity in government scholarships for students in tsunami-affected areas of Cuddalore, just west of the Bay of Bengal.

The prime minister waged a campaign and ended up making headlines — not because she rounded up teachers, the Municipal Council and government leaders to make the scholarship available to schools in her region. Rather, she made headlines because she, herself, was a student at one of those schools. Prime Minister Eskomala Sundaray is just thirteen years old.

Eskomala is halfway through her year term as prime minister of the Erke (meaning "Nature") Parliament. After a democratic election by her school peers, she is leading the district's first Children's Parliament, which includes eight other ministers and a total of twenty members.

With the meetings' backdrop a schoolyard, it would be easy to underestimate what is happening here. But make no mistake, this parliament is not child's play. The students use this forum to make real change. When they notice another classmate without a pencil or notebook, they pull together the rupees to purchase materials; when electricity goes out on their block preventing them from studying, they rally for light; and when a student doesn't show up for school because of issues related to child labor, they get the student back in school.

The Children's Parliament is part of the

Suraksha (Future) program, an evolution of the Bavishia (Transition) programs for children's recovery following the 2004 tsunami. Over the past three years, Catholic Relief Services has worked closely with partners, including the Pondicherry Multipurpose Social Service Society, on trauma counseling, back-to-school initiatives, local children's libraries, parks, puppet shows and street plays. The programs all center on psychosocial care, health and hygiene, and children's rights — the most basic of which may be unfamiliar.

Ram Kumar, project manager for the Pondicherry Multipurpose Social Service Society, explains, "A father might be an alcoholic and push his child into child labor, saying, 'If you don't go to work, the family will starve.' And the child drops out of school. If a child is a laborer, definitely he is a dropout, which we should not allow. It is a child's inherent ... right by his or her birth to get an education."

So what formed in disaster's aftermath as a forum for children to support each other — and to become aware of issues and rights — has evolved into a forum for them to support others, and to do something about those rights.

The Suraksha program started in the summer of 2007 and today it supports as many as

two hundred Children's Parliaments across several districts. Students at interested schools first took part in trainings to learn about parliament structure and practices.

On a recent visit, Ram Kumar and I decided to meet with the person behind those newspaper headlines. We found Eskomala in what was obviously a comfortable role for her, standing before her fellow ministers and some twenty other students sitting in a circle. They started the meeting by singing a song related to keeping good health. After reading the minutes from the previous meeting, things got started.

Meeting Minutes

Eskomala turned her attention first to Public Works Minister Sarath Kumar Thirinevesar, 14, a former school dropout.

"Are you cleaning all the streets and everything?" she asked.

"Yes," said Sarath.

"But the drainage is all blocked and, with the monsoon rains, we've had a lot of problems," she said.

"I went to meet the Municipal Council and the drainage is now clear," he responded.

Eskomala looked surprised. "Why did you go to the MC without telling the group?" she asked.

"I called others and nobody came," he said.

She turned to the rest of the group. "Why didn't you go when he called you?"

A commotion started. People looked down, whispering could be heard, a few voices slightly louder than others indicated that yes, they knew, yes, they should have gone.

Eskomala reprimanded them for not responding to a fellow minister's request and asked if they understood. They said they did.

Next issue.

The sports minister stood. "Why haven't I gotten the sports materials I requested?"

Eskomala looked to the finance minister, who said that the materials could not be purchased because not all of the ministers had paid their monthly dues. Commotion started again. All looks went to the health minister.

The finance minister said, "If you give, we will go then and buy the sports material."

The health minister, his face various shades of red, walked over to the finance minister and made his payment. Everyone clapped. The topic then moved to keeping the school grounds maintained and options for celebrating National Children's Day.

The Collector

When the parliament meeting ended, the prime minister sat with us to talk about the story that had made her a Cuddalore celebrity. Eskomala and her classmates had become aware of a scholarship — the equivalent of \$8 a month for tuition — available to tsunami-affected school students. In fact, some of their family members in other villages were receiving it. Not only was her school not providing the scholarship, Eskomala says, it also was pressuring their parents to pay the fees.

"We decided to write a memo to the education department and copied the government collector [a top government official]. We took a resolution, which our educational minister endorsed and, with the help of the ward counselor and the school's headmistress, sent the memo."

But no reply came. Rather than wait, they decided to deal with the problem in person. With her teacher, parents and the Municipal Council representative in tow, Eskomala walked over to the palatial, gated building of the top government official, known as "the Collector." It should be noted that when people talk about the Collector, it is with the fear, awe and respect usually reserved for a head of state or an international peacemaker recently released from prison. The Collector is all-powerful; few

ever interact with him face-to-face, walk into his office or suggest that he is doing something wrong. Eskomala was about to do just that. This was in August 2007.

“I was trembling with fear and sweating because it was the first time we went in front of the Collector with our petition. My teacher gave me some practice before on how to speak,” recalls Eskomala.

They walked into his office — the size of three classrooms combined — and introduced themselves. The Collector looked at her and said, “You are very small and now you are coming to speak to me like this. Are you not very frightened?”

Eskomala responded, “I have not come for myself; I have come for my entire group. So if I come for myself, I need to be frightened; if I come for my group, why should I feel frightened?”

Surprised, the Collector invited her in and gave her his time. Less than an hour later, it was confirmed: the students at her school and in the surrounding areas would have access to the scholarship.

“In my position I am doing so much. In the positions of public and government ministers, I would want them to do the same work which I am doing. These are their roles. Now we are aware of what they are supposed to do and how they should be done,” Eskomala says.

Though supported by CRS, Eskomala's parliament and the hundreds across this southeastern coastal region are largely run by the children themselves, evolving according to their own perceptions of priorities and change. And they are not alone: Suraksha's Community Vigilance Groups are the grown-up version. Both generations are taking part in a recovery program that will outlast any humanitarian relief timeline.

Endnotes

¹ This article first appeared in the website of Catholic Relief Services, see <http://crs.org/india/children-parliament/>