

Najma Ahmad Shah

I am Najma Ahmad Shah living in a village Pir Kot in Tehsil Nankana Sahib of district Sheikhpura. In February 2002, Khoj started its program for children's Education in our village. We already had heard about Khoj Program for women as some of our relatives live in Kot Mughal (a village included in Phase 1 of the project).

Almost all of the women of our village are denied their basic right of education because there was no school for girls and being 'SAYYED' it was out of question for girls or women to go somewhere for education. I learnt a little from my brothers who used to go to a neighboring town for schooling and later for college education. But for them, my education was not any thing of importance. Therefore, despite all of my eagerness for education, I could not learn but a little of reading and writing.

During preliminary meetings of our village men with Khoj staff, we got the opportunity to meet with the Khoj team members. We were lucky as they were women because otherwise we could never have the permission to see them as girls and women have to observe *parda* at a very young age. We talked to them and asked them to do something for us as well and they agreed to do something.

Now it was again an issue how to mobilize a group of women as there are family feuds in the village and the village is divided into two groups. Within one group, there are again sub groups and there is no question of sending young girls to any body's home. Khoj team talked to the people and selected a place and made a good number of men agreed to let the girls and women come there. It was the place provided by the in laws of my elder sister. So we were also allowed to join the group.

We started learning and discussions made me always think, the kind of life I and other women of my village were leading. We all were totally dependent on our men and we never thought of going any where alone. It was unthinkable that girls could also go for recreation. They could die at home but if the husband or a brother was not there to take them to the hospital, they could not step out of the four walls of the house.

My brothers made fun of me if I talked about getting educated and they always discouraged me. But I kept on working hard.

The whole village stood against us when we were invited to a trip by the project team and many of us were stopped to come to school. But team members approached the issue very differently and they asked our men to send a male member of the community with us and my father was selected for the purpose. We went to Lahore and visited some sites for the first time in our lives.

Once parents came to know that their girls play Snakes and Ladders in the school, they stopped some of my friends saying that it will take the girls towards freedom.

How could we participate in different programs by the project, is another story.

Despite all of these hurdles, we persisted. Seeing my performance, I was offered a post of teacher in the Khoj children's education program (as availability of teacher was a always a problem in our village and no woman ever agreed to come to our village due to rivalries within the village). It was very difficult in the beginning for me and for Khoj team to convince my parents that they should allow me to attend training organized by the project for teachers. Secondly, I was asked not to talk with fathers of the children. It was making my work difficult.

But with the passage of time, now things have started changing and now I not only participate in training but I also go with children to recreational trips. I am preparing for my grade 9

Matriculation examination and would appear for it in March 2005. Along with that I am teaching to a group of 33 children using Khoj methodology.

I mobilized people around me and constructed one room for my class. Children and their parents contributed to that.

Khoj has hired my brother as a teacher for its men's class and I help him in learning Khoj methodology.