The challenge in many areas of human development in India is to begin to think of people as solution. If such a paradigm shift in thinking can come about, hope begins to reemerge. Limitations of financial resources begin to disappear as people take charge and devise cost-effective alternatives. This has been the basic lesson in Madhya Pradesh while trying to address the problems affecting universalisation of primary education.

In much of the earlier efforts at development, people have been seen as passive recipients than as active agents of change. The fact that they continued to be so even in a sector like education which is all about creating capabilities for a critical understanding of the world has been doubly damaging. States in India like Madhya Pradesh whose attainments in sectors like education and health were low were grouped and labelled Bimaru states and survey after survey presented them as areas of despair. The fact that Bimaru attributes needed to be responded to through non conventional and innovative strategies was often overlooked.

New opportunities were being created in states like Madhya Pradesh. A working panchayat raj system came into existence in 1994. It provided a facilitating structure; for direct community action. The government converted selected programmes, of which primary education was one, into a Mission-mode. The tasks of universalising primary education and total literacy were combined to form the Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission in the state.

The Mission had the opportunity to deconstruct the problem associated with universalising primary education in the new context of a revitalised panchayat raj that brought people back in. Instead of academic institutions doing their random sampling, panchayat raj created the opportunity to undertake a door-to-door survey through elected people's representatives capturing the names of children in and out of school. This Lok Sampark Abhiyan transformed into a mobilisation process for primary education redefining the role of the community in primary education from objects of survey to actors who could make the difference. The results of the Lok Sampark Abhiyan (LSA) helped to demolish the myth of near-universal access to primary education in the state. It became clear that the specificities of tribal demography where people lived scattered in several hamlets created major gaps in access. The Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) pioneered by the government of Madhya Pradesh was an effort to respond to this finding of the Lok Sampark Abhiyan. The EGS in addition to becoming a practical method of ensuring the right to learn also reasserted the role of the people in the management of primary education.

The design and strategy of the LSA emerged as a result of intensive discussions among a group of people drawn from the Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission and Non Government Organisations. Key persons who contributed significantly towards designing the Lok Sampark Abhiyan formats, training the State Resource Group and providing continuous resource support to the districts in implementing the Lok Sampark Abhiyan were
Shri Santosh Choubey, Director State Resource Centre (SRC) Bhopal, Asha Mishra, SRC Bhopal, Dr. R. N. Syag, Eklavya, Dewas, Sandeep Naik, Eklavya, Dewas, Dr. Anita Rampal, Director National Literacy Resource Centre, Mussoorie, Kamna Singh, Assistant Director, Directorate of Adult Education, and Anjana Puri, Deputy Manager Media, Rajiv Gandhi Prathmik Shiksha Mission. In developing the LSA formats, the Rajasthan based educational project Lok Jumbish’s resource materials for micro planning were also referred to. The State Resource Centre, Bhopal also produced an audio cassette ‘Bal Geet’ to be used for the Bal Melas and Shri Santosh Kaushik, SRC, Bhopal had a lead role in this. Software development and computerisation of data was done by the State MIS unit of the Rajiv Gandhi Prathmik Shiksha Mission especially Shekhar Sarathe, Mahesh Mulchandani, Neeraj Saxena, Deepak Verma, Rajesh Chourasia, Devendra Sisodia and Sunil Sen.

At the district level Lok Sampark Abhiyan was implemented by the panchayat representatives, teachers and literacy volunteers of 34 districts. Collectors, Chief Executive Officers of Zilla Panchayats and District Officers of Education and Tribal Welfare Departments of 34 districts coordinated and guided its implementation.

The Lok Sampark Abhiyan was undertaken as part of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) implemented in the state with Government of India assistance as well as part of the Total Literacy Campaign. It addressed children of school going age and adult non literates in the age group 15-35. The experience of the Lok Sampark Abhiyan as conducted under DPEP and the Education Guarantee Scheme are discussed here. We hope this will contribute to the continuing debate on the role of the community in primary education.