

गाँव
कनेक्शन
PRESENTS

Teacher CONNECTION

CELEBRATING TEACHERS EVERY DAY

A photograph of a female teacher with long dark hair and glasses, wearing a maroon shirt and a green skirt, smiling and looking up. She is in a classroom with several children in school uniforms. Some children are looking at her, and others are looking towards the camera. There are potted plants on a table in front of her, and three birds are perched on a branch to her left. The background shows a classroom with posters on the wall and a window looking out onto greenery.

**CONSERVATION
CONVERSATIONS
IN THE CLASSROOM**

CONTENTS

DECEMBER 2023



Lead Story

Tales of Teachers 7-10

Resource Room 11-14

Rural Education 15-18

GAON CONNECTION

**FOUNDED IN 2012 TO STRENGTHEN
THE VOICE OF RURAL INDIA**

Founder: Neelesh Misra

Managing Editor: Nidhi Jamwal

Editorial Consultant:

Pankaja Srinivasan

Assistant Editor: Divendra Singh

Design: Emkay

Email: connect@gaonconnection.com

WhatsApp: +91- 95656 - 11118

Cover Image: Midjourney

FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

MY MOTHER is the first conservationist I met in my life. Well, and it is no exaggeration when I say she raised me, groomed me and influenced me enough to become an environmental journalist.

Conserving resources was my mother's mool mantra and she practises it even now. As kids, we invited her wrath if we left even a grain of rice on our plates.

Fans and lights were switched off once we left a room, and every piece of rag was put to some use. Rarely anything made it to the dustbin. Reuse, recycle and reduce were a way of life at a time when there were no posters and nor was there anything called a World Environment Day.

Decades later, it is heartening to see how school teachers have started to make conservation conversations a key element of every day teaching and learning process. And these teachers, many of whom are posted at village schools in far flung locations, are leading by example.

For instance, Mohit Kumar Roy is a science teacher at a government school in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a global biodiversity hotspot. He teaches his students to map the natural resources in their villages and identify ecological rich areas for protection.


Archana Shukla, a teacher at a government school in Madhya Pradesh, has made hundreds of wooden sparrow boxes to help increase the population of the bird which was once a common visitor at our homes. Nowadays, house sparrows have almost disappeared from big cities.

Conserving resources and protecting species and biodiversity are not just social sciences projects that will give us good grades or make way for admission into a sought after school/college. 'Conservation' is a lifestyle choice, a way of life, which each one of us needs to adopt if we really want to save the planet. And teachers like Roy, Shukla and thousands more like them are driving that point in, in their classrooms.

This issue of the Teacher Connection magazine is dedicated to teachers who are also conservationists. If you have a conservation story, share it with us and we will include it in the coming issues of the magazine, and also report about it in *Gaon Connection*.

Nidhi Jamwal

nidhi@gaonconnection.com

 @JamwalNidhi



MIDJOURNEY

CONSERVATION

Lessons in Classrooms

AS THE CHALLENGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE STARES US IN THE FACE, TEACHERS IN VILLAGE SCHOOLS HOLD OUT A BEACON OF HOPE. THEY LEAD BY EXAMPLE AND TEACH THEIR WARDS THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF CONSERVATION.

GAON CONNECTION

SCIENTISTS AND leaders from across the globe have assembled in Dubai, United Arab Emirates where the world's most important event on protecting the planet earth is underway.

The 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference or Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC, more commonly referred to as COP28, is being held from November 30 till December 12 this year.

►► CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

AT COP28, POWERFUL NATIONS PLEDGE CLIMATE ACTION. MEANWHILE, IN VILLAGES, TEACHERS ENGAGE STUDENTS, ENCOURAGING ACTIONS FOR A HEALTHIER WORLD ON A MORE MEANINGFUL, LOCAL SCALE

COPs take place every year, and it is where the world comes together to agree on ways to address the climate crisis, such as limiting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius, helping vulnerable communities adapt to the effects of climate change, and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

While powerful countries gather annually to make sweeping statements of intent to clean up the mess, on a less grand but more meaningful scale, in villages and small towns, school teachers are holding important conversations with their young wards and urging them to take steps to make their world a better and a less sick place.

These are teachers who work for most parts in under-resourced educational centres in remote parts of the country. But, the children in these schools are still connected to mother earth. They are from tribal, farming and fishing communities that perhaps leave the least carbon footprint with their sustainable lifestyles, but who suffer the worst consequences of climate change and environmental degradation.

In the ecologically fragile Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Mohit Kumar Roy, a science teacher at a government school, gathers his students and teaches them to map their villages, identify the ecological hotspots and mark out areas that need environmental care and protection.

His students now know the names of the flora and fauna in their respective villages, the rivers that flow nearby and why it is important



(Top) Science teacher Mohit Kumar Roy in an Andaman and Nicobar Islands government school instructs students to map villages, identify ecological hotspots, and mark areas needing environmental care; (above) Madhusudan Rao, the headmaster of a government school in a Karnataka village, ensured students learned about rainwater harvesting and observed its installation on the campus.

to care for them. Naming the details, writing them down and having conversations about them is a huge step towards raising awareness and sensitivity to their environment.

Over 1,700 kilometres west of the islands in mainland India, a government school in a village in Tumakuru district in Karnataka captures every drop of rain and wastewater and ensures it has plenty and more water for gardening, cleaning, cooking and of course drinking.

The headmaster of the school, Madhusudan Rao is also a science enthusiast who ensured the students learnt about rainwater harvesting and watched the rainwater harvesting systems being put into place in the school campus. The school harvests 560 kilo litres (KL) of water out

of which 280 KL is stored and reused, and 280 KL is recharged annually.

Further north of India, teachers, parents, non-profits and individuals connected directly or indirectly to as many as 500 government schools in Uttar Pradesh are working towards making their institutes 'carbon neutral'.

The effort is on in these schools to bring down carbon emissions drastically. Teachers and students are avoiding the use of fossil fuels on campus, conserving every drop of water, planting saplings of indigenous flora and ensuring they survive, cycling and car-pooling, responsibly disposing garbage and constantly talking about ways to reuse, recycle and reduce.

►► CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



(Clockwise from left) The headmaster Alok Tripathi's school campus in Mahadeva village, Satna, Madhya Pradesh; 'Carbon-neutral' government schools in Uttar Pradesh; Wooden boxes made by teacher Archana Shukla for house sparrows at her Madhya Pradesh government school.

Teachers who love the environment are sparing no effort to pass on that love to their impressionable students. In Satna, Madhya Pradesh, headmaster Alok Tripathi from Mahadeva village refused to give up greening his school campus. He planted saplings repeatedly, and repeatedly they were uprooted by miscreants or eaten up by stray cattle.

But Tripathi persisted and today, thanks to him and his students, three and a half acres of the school campus is singing with 250 varieties of indigenous plants including medicinal herbs.

Teachers are also emphasising on the need to reach out to vulnerable species. They teach their students to be empathetic and lend a helping hand to nature whenever they can.

Like Archana Shukla, a teacher at a government school in Madhya Pradesh is doing. She herself makes wooden boxes for house sparrows to roost safely in and her students do

RURAL TEACHERS LEAD BY EXAMPLE, INSTILLING IN STUDENTS THE VALUES OF CONSERVING, PRESERVING, AND RESPECTING NATURE. THESE STUDENTS, SENT INTO THE WORLD, CARRY FORWARD THE MISSION, FOSTERING POSITIVE CHANGE.

so too.

These teachers are walking the talk. They are impressing upon young minds to conserve, preserve and respect Nature in any way they can. The hundreds of students that they send into the world, will then continue the good work and bring about a change.

In Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, San-

jay Molur, a conservation biologist spearheads a course on conservation called the Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation. He believes that empowering and informing the youth is the best chance our planet has to survive.

"We have no time to dilly-dally about climate change. We need to get our act together immediately... the more knowledge with the youth, the better are the chances of making a difference in time," he told *Gaon Connection*.

Telling students about biodiversity, teaching them the nuts and bolts of conservation and leading by example can have a much greater impact than what we imagine.

"We all need to save our native biodiversity that is a product of over four billion years of evolution, and we have to participate and contribute to saving the only known living system in the solar system and the universe. It is the only home we have - the earth," he appealed. ■

A Teacher Fights Substance Abuse in Students in Meghalaya

SAYANTANI DEB

WILLIAMNAGAR IS a remote town in northeast India located 225 kilometres from Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya. Nestled in East Garo Hills, the area used to be insurgency-hit and no teacher wanted to go to Williamnagar to educate the tribal children there.

And then came Gamchi Timre R Marak, who for the past three decades is not only teaching children in the remote corner of the country but also counselling and helping them fight substance abuse.

"When students embroiled in substance abuse come to seek help, I make it a point to understand the root cause and provide counselling tailored to their specific needs. In due course, I connect them with the youth counsellors from the Child Protection Office for extensive sessions," 59-year-old Marak told *Gaon Connection*. She received the prestigious national teachers award in 2022.

One of her ex-students, who is now a successful professional, recalled how he spent his teenage years in a dark space. He fell into substance abuse that ravaged his physical and mental well-being.

"Two decades ago I got addicted to illicit substances and couldn't get through the day without them. I lost interest in studies, I barely spoke to anyone in my family or outside and spent most of my days in a haze," he told *Gaon Connection*. It is then that Marak, who was then the head teacher of his school, intervened and saved her student's life.

"She came home, spoke to my family members, did preliminary counselling, and even took me to a professional counsellor. Gradually, I regained my zeal for learning and other extracurricular pursuits and finally became successful in life," he narrated wishing to remain anonymous.

Marak has turned around the lives of several young children in remote corners of Meghalaya. Her care,



Marak has turned around the lives of several young children in remote corners of Meghalaya. PHOTO BY ARRANGEMENT

empathy and determination have pulled children back from the brink into the mainstream once again.

Recollecting her journey, she said, "When my husband and I came here [Williamnagar], there were just a handful of educated people. That motivated us to spread the light of education in this remote place."

In 1989, Marak helped Town Baptist Church, Williamnagar, in opening the Town Nursery School, later renamed Greenyard English School. In 1994, along with like-minded people and at the behest of the community, she established Educere School for junior students.

With time the school progressed and was granted recognition by the Meghalaya Board of School Education in 2002. Marak's efforts and dedication bore fruit when in 2014 the school was elevated to the higher secondary level. She is now the principal of Educere Higher Secondary School.

With an enrollment of 370 students, mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds, Educere Higher Secondary School has evolved into a need-based local institution. It caters to a diverse lot of students who could be those seeking quality and inno-

vative education, dropouts, students expelled from other institutions, or disillusioned youngsters with nowhere else to turn.

There are also children from marginalised communities, children of single parents or orphans who require special care and attention. Marak is quick to point out that the children are not segregated. The school is inclusive and pays extra attention to those that need it, she explained.

Miansha N Marak, a class 10 student, said how she was warmly welcomed into the school. "I was studying in another school but as I did not perform well there I had to leave. I took admission here where the teachers were exceptionally helpful and supportive. Our head teacher herself takes motivational classes which encourage me to do better," said Miansha. She was one of the best students in the class, she said proudly.

"Mostly, teachers hesitate to join schools in challenging locations such as these. Marak chose Williamnagar and is doing her level best to develop its education scenario. Meghalaya needs more teachers like Marak," said Samuel K Sangma, Sub-Divisional Education officer. ■



The idea to organise a seven-day running event at the school for the students was the brainchild of the acting-headmaster Arbind Kumar Tiwary. PHOTOS: ARBIND KUMAR TIWARY

Eggs-cited to run!

PANKAJA SRINIVASAN

NIRANJAN MAJHI cannot decide what he loves more. Running or enjoying the *anda fry* (fried egg)! The class seven student runs regularly in his school and has recently won a rich haul of seven eggs as a prize for running seven consecutive days.

The idea to organise a seven-day running event at the school for the students was the brainchild of the acting-headmaster Arbind Kumar Tiwary of the Utkarmit Madhya Vidyalaya in Tangrain village, East Singhbhum, Potka block in Jharkhand.

"Between 1 November and 7 November, 71 students from classes four to eight signed up to run six kilometres every day," Tiwary told *Gaon Connection*. He called it the Anda Challenge. At the end of the challenge, the participants were all given seven eggs each, one for each day they ran. "The idea is to get them to eat an egg a day to fulfil their protein requirement," Tiwary said.

Students were set the task of running six kilometres a day. They had to start from the gates of their school, run three kilometres to the neighbouring village of Chakri, touch the government school gates there and then run back.

"I think keeping fit is essential to build bright futures. And the students of my school are in any case a very active lot. They play a lot, run

around and I thought getting them to run in a structured way will go a long way to building their character and confidence," he said.

So, the rules for the event was that they had to run seven consecutive days; they had to run in groups of at least three and not alone; if they felt tired, they could walk; but on no account would any excuses be accepted.

Several of the students have shown a natural ability that Tiwary wants to hone and nurture. Pushpa Majhi, a 13-year-old student is one of them. "I took part in the running challenge. I began at 6 am every morning and ran six kilometres in under an hour," she said.

Rakesh Bhagat, Niranjana and Sumitra Munda also ran every single day for seven days, and won seven eggs each for their effort. Rakesh said he enjoyed nothing more than

running, playing football and singing and was hoping to become a professional singer.

Meanwhile, in between the seven day challenge at their school, Pushpa, Niranjana, Sumitra and Rakesh were part of the 41 runners from their school who participated in a run at Jamshedpur on November 5. Twenty one girls and 20 boys, between the ages of 12 and 14 from the school, ran five kilometres in the 8th edition of Tata Steel Jamshedpur Runathon 2023.

"The students ran the 5K event that started at the JRD Sports Complex in Jamshedpur and wound its way around the city. The organisers had generously waived off the registration fee and it was an amazing experience for me as well as the children," Tiwary said.

The other happy outcome of the outing to Jamshedpur, Tiwary said, was one of the athletics coaches who watched Pushpa running told him she was a natural. "He told me that she should be trained and encouraged to run more," Tiwary said with pride. The headmaster hoped this experience would give more traction to the running event he had organised in his own school, back in Tangrain.

"I have promised the students that if they keep up their running for three months, I will buy them all a pair of shoes each," Tiwary said. "They deserve so much more, but I have spent money on this from my personal income and at the moment I am unable to do more," he said. But he hoped people would step forward to sponsor this activity in the school. ■

STUDENTS WERE SET THE TASK OF RUNNING SIX KILOMETRES A DAY. THEY HAD TO START FROM THE GATES OF THEIR SCHOOL, RUN THREE KILOMETRES TO THE NEIGHBOURING VILLAGE AND THEN RUN BACK

From a Cowshed to an Academy for Karbi Tribe Kids in Assam



In the Karbi tribe village, menstruation has been a taboo, leading many girls to quit school at puberty. The village school breaks this trend by openly discussing it with all students. PHOTOS: RITU RUPAM KASHYAP

SAYANTANI DEB

AN UNUSUAL slogan welcomes visitors to Parijat Academy. 'Bleed With Dignity' is painted on one of its walls. Inside a classroom, teenage girls in their navy blue and white school uniforms cut and sew pieces of cloth on a sewing machine. They are making sanitary pads for themselves, their friends and other rural women in the neighbourhood. Making pads is a part of their curriculum at school.

"I make my own sanitary pads. I can use them for at least two years. They are sustainable and reusable," Majoni Tumung, a student of class 10 of Parijat Academy, told *Gaon Connection*.

Parijat Academy, located in Pamohi village on the outskirts of Guwahati in northeast India, is breaking taboos around periods and educating rural girls about menstrual hygiene.

Menstruation has so far remained a taboo topic among the predominantly Karbi tribe community of the village and every year a large number of girls drop out of school once they hit puberty. One reason being lack of sanitary



facilities, and the other being stigma and shame associated with periods.

The village school is trying to buck the trend by openly discussing menstruation with its students, both male and female. Since 2017, the female students at the school have been making their own reusable and washable sanitary pads. They regularly gift them to their friends and relatives too. So far, the school has distributed free pads to around 4,000 women.

Uttam Teron, who belongs to Pamohi village, is the brain behind this school, which he established twenty years ago in 2003. A science graduate from Cotton College, Guwahati, he was disturbed that edu-

cation was hardly a priority amongst the tribal communities in the area and decided to do something about it.

"The tribal inhabitants of the villages could not afford to educate their children. After completing my studies, I gave private tuitions, and with the money saved, I began a non-profit learning centre in a cowshed with just one desk and one bench," the 47-year-old reminisced.

"The learning centre that began with four students has turned into this full fledged school, Parijat Academy, with around 300 underprivileged students studying between nursery and class 10," said Teron, who is also the director of the school. The school is free to the students and is run with money from fundraising. It has 21 teachers who mostly do voluntary service and are paid as and when the school has resources.

When Teron started to work closely with the village inhabitants and the children, he realised that they knew little about menstrual hygiene. "There was no awareness about menstruation and they did not know how to keep themselves clean and healthy during those days of the month," he said.

With the help of his wife Aimoni Tumung, Teron started an awareness drive, but with a difference. They commissioned a professional artist to make a wall painting with the words 'Bleed with Dignity' written boldly and prominently across it. "The intention was to make the girls feel comfortable and inform the boys that the periods are a natural phenomenon," Teron said.

In 2017, a USA-based non-profit, The Day for Girls, approached Tumung and Teron to conduct sanitary napkins-making training workshops for the girls. "The girls and women of the village made the sanitary pads and distributed them in the nearby villages," Tumung told *Gaon Connection*.

In the past few years, under the guidance of Tumung Baideo (Baideo means ma'am in Assamese), girls in the school have been making their own reusable and washable sanitary pads, and also gifting to others. Tumung described the process of making the sanitary pads, which are cloth-based and do not cause irritation or infections. ■

Creating a Scene in School

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

SHIVAM SINGH, a 40-year-old teacher at the Lakeshar Primary School in Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh, wanted to build a healthy flourishing teacher-student relationship. And he hit upon the idea of making a movie with the help of primary school teachers, students and their parents.

He started shooting the movie called 'Sir Ji' in December 2022 and completed the shoot in July 2023. Sir Ji was released on September 5 this year on a YouTube channel owned by Singh named 'Shivam Sir Ji'. The one hour-40-minute movie has hit 100k views within a fortnight of its release. Singh shot and edited the entire movie on his Samsung mobile phone with the help of an editing app called Kinemaster.

Set in a school in Khaparhan Nyay Panchayat in Jaunpur, the movie draws comparisons between the tra-



Sir Ji in the movie is about to retire and he worries how his students will fare after he leaves.

SHIVAM SINGH

ditional and modern teaching methods. Sir Ji has eight teachers, 15 students and four guardians acting in it.

Sir Ji in the movie is about to retire and he worries how his students will fare after he leaves. As the story progresses, issues that plague rural society crop up. Casteism, discrimination, problems of students dropping out, the struggles of students with special needs and of course poverty.

"The movie also forces parents to think if they are being supportive enough to their children, and are role models. Or are they being demanding, unreasonable and difficult with them," said Shivam Singh.

Yash Kannoja, a 11-year-old student,

both acted and handled the camera for the film. "I love shooting videos on my mother's phone. One day when Singh Sir asked me to help him with the shoot I was very excited. I want to keep doing such stuff, and I also want to learn video editing from Sir so that I can also edit my videos before putting them out on social media platforms," said Kannoja.

"Videography and photography should also be taught in schools. They will help students hone their skill set and who knows, may come in use for them in their future, either as their main job or even as a side hustle," Singh pointed out.

A Rural Headmaster & His Students Launch a Monthly Magazine

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

INTANGRAIN village in East Singhbhum, Jharkhand, a headmaster is encouraging his students to write short stories, poems and draw sketches for a monthly magazine. The monthly magazine helps in honing writing and drawing skills in the budding writers and artists.

Their school magazine titled 'Diya' was launched by Arbind Tiwary, the headmaster of the Upgraded Middle School in 2017 as a means to hone the creative skills amongst his students. The magazine consists of short stories, poems, drawings while also dedicating space to articles on health, education and environment which



The magazine consists of short stories, poems, drawings while also dedicating space to articles on health, education and environment which are contributed by his students. ARBIND TIWARY

are contributed by his students.

"I thought that it is important to

start working on students' creative development and hone their skills apart from the usual subjects they study. I gathered some students and discussed making a magazine and to my surprise all of them were happy to be a part of it," said Tiwary.

"Writing poems and stories and doing artwork is not what usually happens in rural schools. I thought I could take up this challenging yet joyful task of cultivating reading and writing habits in my students. Apart from this, I also ensure that the students learn archery and scouting within the school premises," the 52-year-old added.

WATCHING BIRDS IS AN EASY WAY TO GET CHILDREN OUTDOORS, WHETHER IT IS TO A NEIGHBOURHOOD LAKE OR PARK, OR IN THE SCHOOL CAMPUS.



Nature Is The Best Teacher

MIDJOURNEY

GARIMA BHATIA

WHAT ARE your earliest memories of nature and wildlife? I grew up in cities, but I do remember a langur once entering our house; a kingfisher and golden oriole seen from our balcony; catching fireflies in the dark and watching them twinkle.

Children have an innate affinity to nature and a curiosity about the natural world. Unfortunately, this connection is often lost when growing up. If nurtured, however, a child's association with nature can last a life-

time and lead to several physical and emotional benefits.

There is a growing body of research indicating that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood development, and improves focus, observation skills and mental health.

On the other hand, the lack of nature exposure that is an alarming aspect of modern life results in what has been called 'nature deficit disorder', which is linked to various childhood trends like a rise in obesity, depression and attention disorders.

But what is nature and how can one connect with it? Contrary to what we might think, nature and wildlife isn't just out there in the forests and wildlife sanctuaries but really all around us in the form of insects, reptiles and birds. Watching birds is an easy way to get children outdoors, whether it is to a neighbourhood lake or park, or in the school campus.

Birds provide a window to nature: they remind us of our connection to the planet. They excite our curiosity and our imagination with their beautiful colours and their enchanting

MATCH THE BILL WITH THE FOOD!



Illustration: L. Shyamal/Wikimedia

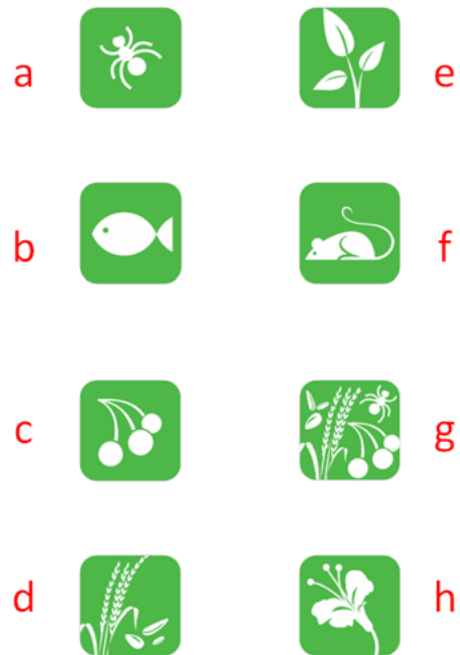


Illustration: Early Bird flashcards

COURTESY: EARLY-BIRD.IN

songs. Many birds undertake heroic feats of migration annually, but even their everyday behaviours can provide an endless source of enjoyment and inspiration to us all.

"Birdwatching is your lifetime ticket to the theatre of nature."

If you are a teacher or a parent wanting to bring your students or child closer to the natural world, birds can be a perfect starting point in this journey. Don't feel limited by your own lack of knowledge, as you don't need to be an expert. All you need is an open mind and a lot of patience and curiosity to attune your eyes and ears to the avian sights and sounds around you!

In fact, discovering and learning about birds together with your students can be an immensely rewarding and enjoyable experience for all.

"Live as if you were to die tomorrow; learn as if you were to live forever" - Mahatma Gandhi

Binoy is a teacher in a Government middle school in Nazira Assam. His own interest in birds led him to design different activities for the school children. One of the most popular activities is called 'Bird Bingo' where he

makes small groups of 3-4 children, gives them a Bingo sheet, a pencil and a notebook and sends them out to explore the school campus.

While playing the game they also make notes of whatever they observe on the walk. Children are encouraged to share their experiences once they are back in the classroom. There are small prizes for the winners.

Activities like 'Bird Bingo' that don't focus on identification of birds/nature but on careful observation and documentation can be a good way to get children to explore the natural world around them.

Games are a valuable tool to make learning fun, and there are many innovative ones developed by Indian wildlife conservation organisations as educational resources.

'What's That Bird?' is a flashcards game that introduces 40 common bird species that are found in India. 'Shell shocker' is a card game about turtles, while 'Snake-a-doo' is a twist on snakes and ladders, designed for snake awareness. These can be purchased online, but there are also many free resources that you can download and print yourself for use

in your classroom.

Using art and creative activities also works wonders with children of all age groups. Art stimulates children to observe, feel, and become more sensitive while allowing them to use all their senses.

You can introduce children to nature journaling or experiment with craft, poetry and skits about nature. Children can create their own puppets out of waste material, come up with stories and put up a performance for the school.

A bird/nature themed event could be planned to coincide with any of these days: World Environment Day (June 5th), Dr. Salim Ali's birthday, celebrated as National Birdwatching Day in India (Nov 12th), Great Backyard Bird Count (Feb 16-19th, 2024).

None of these activities requires a knowledge of bird identification. However, it may be helpful for the educator to be familiar with the common birds of India, their natural history, and any cultural references that may particularly resonate with those new to birds.

A broad familiarity with these aspects will allow you to be flexible in

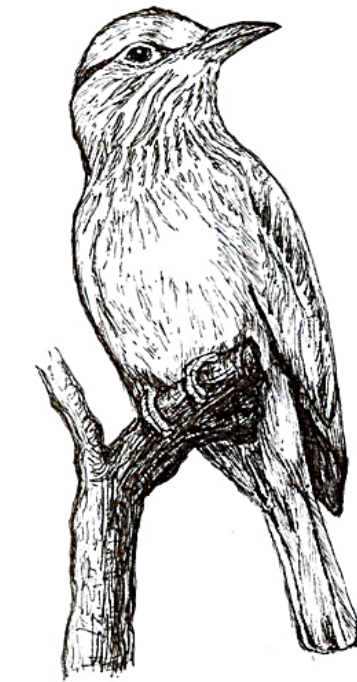
your education work, adjusting what you talk about depending on what your audience seems most interested in. For example, if a child asks you about the intelligence of crows, you might recall the Panchatantra story about the crow and the pitcher of water.

There are several simple resources that you can refer to while learning about the common birds in your neighbourhood. There are free apps which give you guidance in this regard. The most popular one is Merlin, which you can use to browse through the birds of your area, and read about their behaviour and calls.

There are also interactive posters available online from Early Bird, which can be accessed on your phone, which play the bird call when the bird is clicked, and list the bird names in many different Indian languages. All these different resources are listed below for your reference.

If you live in a big city, chances are that there are several birdwatchers in your area already, and there may be different groups conducting free walks on weekends to urban lakes and parks. Join such a group to accelerate your learning and get identification tips from experts.

Over time, you will find yourself equipped to lead bird walks for children and engage them in different aspects of appreciating birds and



COURTESY: EARLY-BIRD.IN

nature. You can even come up with ways to connect your classroom teaching to birds and nature.

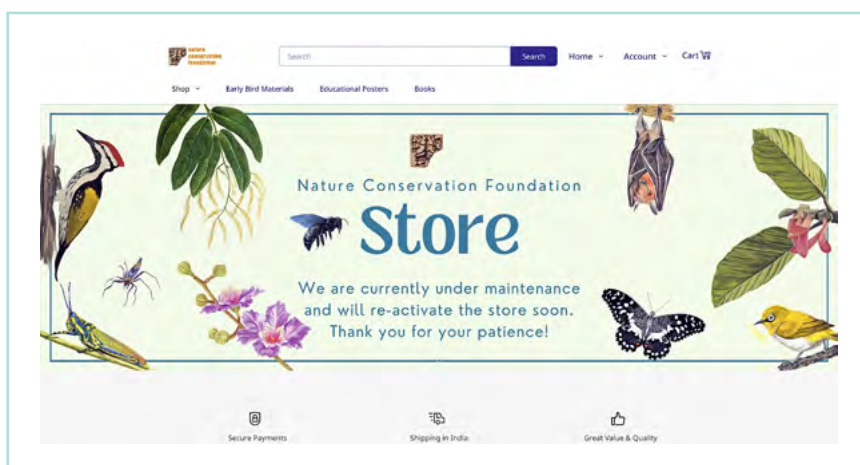
Despite all the pressures of the curriculum and academics, it is possible to create meaningful nature experiences within the classroom. In this age of climate uncertainty, it is critically important that our children connect with nature, because awareness leads to curiosity, empathy and finally a love for the natural world, which will guide them to make bet-

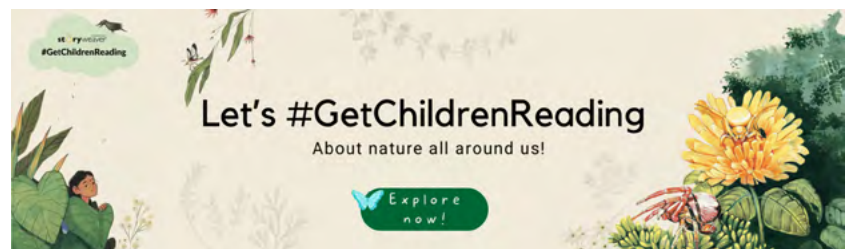
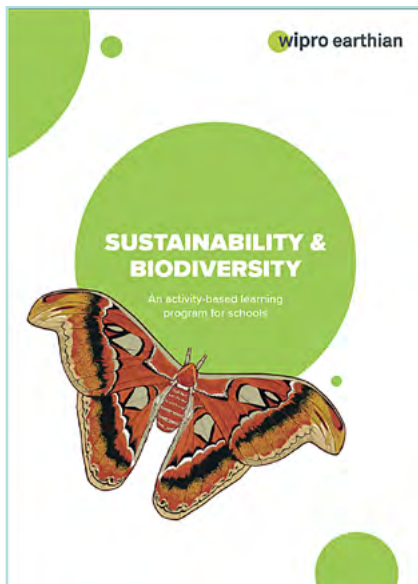
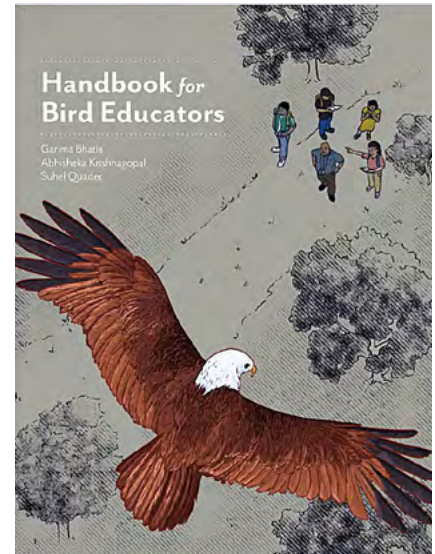
ter choices for themselves and for our changing planet.

In the words of educationist David Sobel – “If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it.”

Garima Bhatia is a Bengaluru based birdwatcher and photographer who heads Early Bird (early-bird.in), a non-profit initiative to connect children with birds.

HERE ARE SOME RESOURCES TO HELP IN YOUR JOURNEY







Six football coaches in the school enhance the skills of boys and girls.

MRIDA EDUCATION AND WELFARE SOCIETY

A School Trains Tribal Kids in Football & Coding

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

IN a remote corner of Mandla district, about 400 kilometres from Bhopal in central India, football players such as Erling Haaland of Norway and Jude Bellingham from the UK are quite famous among the tribal children of Mohgaon in Madhya Pradesh. These children of the Gond adivasi community aspire to become like these international players when they grow up.

Tejaswini Maravi is one of them. The 12-year-old Gond tribal girl has been learning football since she was only seven. "I have been playing football since I was seven. I always wanted to be a footballer and my school is helping me realise my dream. I love my mornings that start with the football practice in the school ground at six [6 am] and end after three hours of rigorous training," Tejaswini told *Gaon Connection*.

She studies in class eight of the Riverside Natural School, a residential school that was started for the tribal children in 2016 and is located in Mohgaon town of Chhindwara. Tejaswini's father is a farmer in Amjhar village and she has two siblings. She lives in the hostel of her school which has classes from one to 12. There is no school or hostel fee.

Riverside Natural School is a ray of hope for hundreds of tribal children as the school not only provides free education to adivasi kids but also trains them in football. Last year, in 2022, students of the school participated in the Subroto Cup International Football Tournament, a prestigious international inter-school football tournament that is held in New Delhi.

This unique school has been set up by Mrida Education and Welfare Society, a non-profit, with the aim to fulfil the education dream and career aspirations of tribal children from remote rural areas. With focus on contextual learning and skill building in sports, robotics, and programming, Mrida's work is transforming the lives of marginalised tribal children. Apart from football, students at the school also learn coding.

"We focus on a new approach that along with studies, co-curricular activities like games and computer programming are equally important for the overall development of the students," Priya Nadkarni co-founder of Mrida Education and Welfare Society told *Gaon Connection*.

Mrida provides free of cost accommodation, food, and training and equipment to all the students.

The playground for the students is

right in front of the school. It was farmland which has been converted into a playground. There are six football coaches in the school to look after the training of the students both boys and girls, to teach them to play better.

"After coming to this school, I have been able to focus on both education and my dream of playing football. When our team had to go to participate in the Subroto cup in Delhi I thought I won't be able to play but my coaches and teammates ensured to motivate me to play better," said Tejaswini. At least 200 students of the school are being trained in football.

Like Tejaswini, 12-year-old Ambika Dhurwey of class seven also loves playing football. She also stays in the school hostel and has been playing football since she was seven years old. Ambika's father is the football coach at the school.

In 2017, when Riverside Natural School introduced football coaching, the same year it also started coding classes for its students. These classes help students who are interested in learning computer programming.

Devendra Dhurwey, 16-year-old student of class 11th at the Riverside Natural School finds these classes very useful. "I want to become a software engineer because learning different coding languages interests me a lot. We have coding class in the morning in which we are taught HTML and C++," the student explained, who belongs to Mandla and whose father is a farmer. He lives in the school hostel and visits home during the vacations. ■



VIDYARATH, A MOBILE 'TEMPO' CLASSROOM IN MAHARASHTRA

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

THERE IS excitement as the children know it is time for the Vidyarth to trundle into their school. And soon, it does. A cream coloured tempo proudly displaying a huge poster with Vidyarth written on it, drives into the government school in Lonikand village in Pune district, Maharashtra.

Inside the tempo are several shelves with colourful books that add colour while in another corner are neatly arranged five to six laptops, study material and stationery items, and a science lab. The tempo has 300 books of short stories and poetry for the children to read. They are in English, Hindi and Marathi.

Vidyarth (Education on Wheel) is an initiative introduced by Think Sharp Foundation, a non-profit founded in 2011 supported by Forms and Surfaces India with an aim to encourage children to read and take interest in science and computers. Vidyarth goes to several government schools in rural Maharashtra and conducts computer and coding classes.

Since 2015, the foundation has been collaborating with the Maharashtra government to provide learn-

ing opportunities to the rural children. Currently it works with around 300 government schools in Maharashtra and four in Gujarat.

Muskan Kumari is an eleven year old student who studies at the Zilla Parishad Prathamik School in Bakori village in Pune district. She told *Gaon Connection* that her favourite subject was Mathematics. Muskan Kumari waits for Vidyarth to come to her school and dedicates one hour at the mobile classroom for her computer classes.

"I have learnt MS Word, letter writing and painting on the computer. Sometimes, I also teach other students who are new to the class. I think learning computers will be my biggest asset as I want to see myself as a computer teacher in future," said Muskan Kumari as she carefully made a digital painting.

"Vidyarth was started in October 2021. About 100 children from Lonikand and Bakori villages attend classes in Vidyarth in batches of 20. Sometimes we park the tempo in the compound of a school and hold classes outdoors," Balaji Shinde, who works at Think Sharp Foundation, told *Gaon Connection*.

Vidyarth has four sessions for

Vidyarth (Education on Wheel) is an initiative introduced by Think Sharp Foundation, with an aim to encourage children to read and take interest in science and computers. THINKSHARP FOUNDATION.

the children between 11 am and 5 pm where students are taught different subjects. Computer and Book Mitras are selected from amongst the students who in turn encourage their friends to use computers and read more books.

Thirty-nine-year-old Santosh Phad, from Mandwa village in Beed district of Maharashtra, is the founder of Think Sharp Foundation. He said coming from a rural background himself, he could resonate with the children from the villages. "I always felt a little out of place and left-behind and had low self confidence and communication skills. I wanted to do something for children from my kind of background so that they could learn new things, be confident and hone their communication skills," he told *Gaon Connection*.

"I didn't have the resources that other people had. So I wanted to make sure rural children had the opportunities to access quality education," he added.

Vidyarth is just one of the many programmes that his foundation runs. It also provides tabs, projectors, TV, toys, and books to the government schools, and helps with the upgradation of infrastructure in the schools.

Think Sharp Foundation also offers a programme called Study Mall. "Through this we provide computer education, sports material and books. We focus on multimedia content and digital learning so that children are introduced to new things and they learn each day," Phad explained.

The foundation designed an application called the Digi Library application to provide students easy access to a wide variety of books. The application is available on all android devices. There are more than 1,000 books available in audio and PDF format in Marathi, English and Hindi, and there are more than 5,000 people already using it. ■



PHOTOS: ADHARSHILA FACEBOOK PAGE

“The tribal families relocated from Kuno were very keen on providing quality education to their children, so we decided to give them a platform for education,” said Asmita Kabra, founder of Adharshila.

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

IN THE remote village of Agara in the Sheopur district, Madhya Pradesh, a school is giving wings to the dreams of the Sahariya tribe, a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) and one of the most marginalised adivasi communities in central India.

Students enrolled at the Adharshila Higher Secondary School belong to over 1,500 Sahariya families who gave up their forest homes about 25-30 years ago to carve out the Kuno National Park, which is spread across Sheopur and Morena districts.

The protected area aims at establishing a second independent population of the Asiatic Lions, outside Gir in Gujarat, to reduce chances of the animal's extinction. And for the same Sahariya people, a traditionally forest-dwelling community, moved out of the forests to support the government's efforts for conservation.

But displacement often leads to new challenges for the tribal groups, who already face poverty, illiteracy, early child marriage and malnutrition. Apart from these social ills, Sahariya (Saharia) tribe of central India is also known to have the highest incidence of tuberculosis in India.

To ensure that the children of the Sahariya families displaced due to Kuno National Park get access to education and a better life, the

ADHARSHILA IS GIVING WINGS TO THE DREAMS OF SAHARIYA TRIBE KIDS

Adharshila Higher Secondary School has taken them under its fold.

Sanjana is a class 9 student of the school. Her father is an ambulance driver. “I have seen my father struggle and I don't want us to go through what he has gone through, that's why I'll study hard so that I can become a police officer,” Sanjana, whose other love is writing poetry in Hindi, told *Gaon Connection*.

The school, located about 230 kilometres from the state capital Bhopal, was set up in 2005 by the Adharshila Shiksha Samiti. It is a school for the young first generation learners of the Sahariya tribe. The aim is to train the underprivileged kids to engage creatively with life and offer them opportunities to learn.

The school is from classes one to 12 and has 523 students predominantly from the Sahariya adivasi community. The students get free uniforms,

books, mid day meals and stationery from the school. There is also a school bus that picks them up from their villages and drops them back.

“The tribal families relocated from Kuno were very keen on providing quality education to their children, so we decided to give them a platform,” Asmita Kabra, founder of Adharshila Shiksha Samiti told *Gaon Connection*. She is an economist and professor at School of Human Ecology, Dr BR Ambedkar University in Delhi.

“The Adharshila school caters to children from non-displaced villages as well near which the relocated villages were settled. These villages — Agara, Chentikheda, Larde — are also predominantly inhabited by adivasi, dalit and OBC families,” said Kabra.

Kedar Adivasi is a former student of the Adharshila School, who is now a teacher there. He teaches Social Sciences to students of classes six to the tenth. Coming from the displaced Sahariya tribe himself, he was especially keen to do his bit for the community.

“I think serving the community and its people is the most crucial part of our existence. When I completed my studies from Adharshila I was too young to understand and decide what my life should look like but deep down I knew I will teach the Sahariya children so that they can work on their future and not live a life of penury,” the 30-year-old Kedar said. ■

A Rural Library Keeps Alive the Memory of a Galwan Valley Martyr

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

ASHA JANI is a History Honours student at the Jamshedpur Workers' College in Jharkhand. When 18-year-old Asha comes home to Baharagora village in East Singhbhum, her favourite occupation is visiting the Veer Shaheed Ganesh Hansda Library that was set up in 2020 at the Bhandarshol village, 12 kilometres away from her own village.

Though it is a little far, Asha makes it a point to visit the library at least twice a week. She said she tagged along with her father who works somewhere there. Asha comes from an underprivileged background; her father is a mechanic and her brother is an auto driver. Education has always looked like a far-fetched dream for her and being able to pursue higher studies and have access to books was a dream-come-true.

A large number of children from tribal communities in East Singhbhum are benefiting from the community library in Bhandarshol village, which has been named after 22-year-old sepoy Ganesh Hansda who was killed in June 2020 in the line of duty in Galwan Valley. He belonged to Koshaphaliya village in Chingra panchayat in East Singhbhum.

Veer Shaheed Ganesh Hansda Library has been set up by Nischay Foundation, a non profit started in 2017. The library, which functions out of a community building near the village temple, offers free books and reading space to children.

Tarun Kumar, a 33-year-old young man from Jamshedpur, started the library in his village to help the underprivileged kids of the tribal area. He started the library to get the children to start reading. Kumar is also the founder of Nischay Foundation, which works in the space of education and menstrual hygiene amongst tribal communities in rural Jharkhand.

"I thought that tribal children should have books and magazines available to them so I started a library. The library



In 2017, Tarun Kumar initiated the Veer Shaheed Ganesh Hansda Library in the village, aiming to support underprivileged kids in the tribal area. TARUN KUMAR.

opens every day at 10 am and remains open till 6 pm. Sometimes grown ups are also spotted using it," Tarun Kumar told *Gaon Connection*. He along with some children and a few others in the village look after the day to day running of the library.

"I believe that books will be the friends of the children, that will add to their personality and help them shape their future and build knowledge," the founder said. According to him, about 100 children use the library regularly and they come from villages around Bhandarshol in East Singhbhum district.

The library has around 200 books and covers various topics such as science, mathematics, etc which students can read whenever they want. There are some books on personality development and biographies of

freedom fighters, informed Kumar.

Like Asha Jani, Bikash Bhuiya from Bhandarshol village comes to the library to quench his thirst for history. The 19-year-old is doing a diploma course in electrical engineering and is the son of a vegetable vendor. "I want to apply for the role of junior engineer in railways," Bhuiya told *Gaon Connection*.

"Since the library opened I have sat and read for hours in it without any interruption. Some of the children also use the space to study or do their homework as their homes may not have the space or quiet to do so," Bhuiya added.

After the success of the rural library at Bhandarshol village, Nischay Foundation has started another such library at Chingida village, which is five kilometres away from Bhandarshol, informed Kumar. The Nischay Foundation also offers a fellowship programme that has helped more than 25 children study further. They select meritorious students and help them with the fees.

"We help them with tuition fees, buying books, stationery and college fees so that they don't drop out," said Kumar. Funds for these activities are raised through individual donations and crowdfunding. ■

THE LIBRARY HAS AROUND 200 BOOKS AND COVERS VARIOUS TOPICS SUCH AS SCIENCE, MATHEMATICS, ETC WHICH STUDENTS CAN READ WHENEVER THEY WANT.

