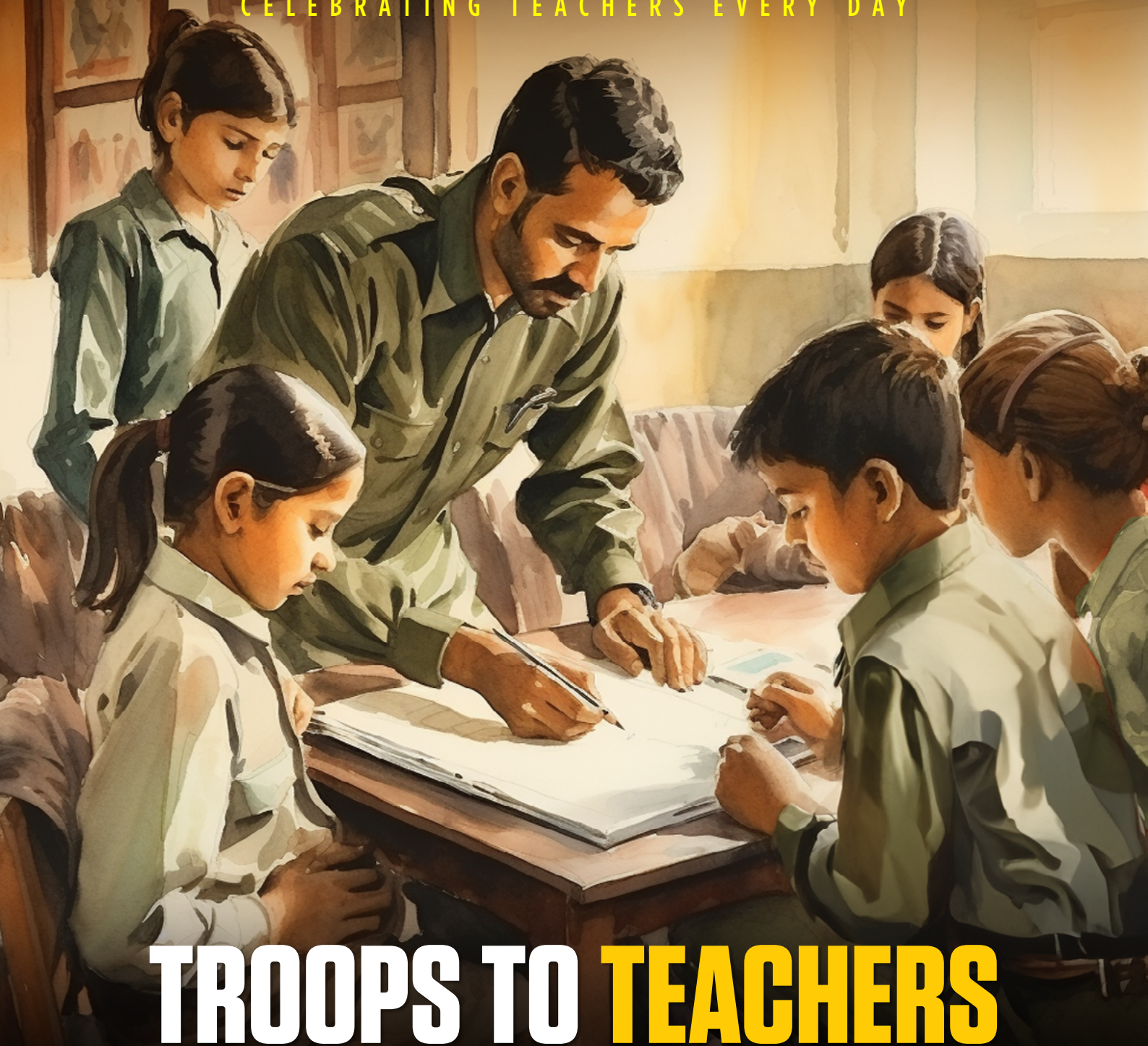


गाँव कनेक्शन

PRESENTS

Teacher CONNECTION

CELEBRATING TEACHERS EVERY DAY



TROOPS TO TEACHERS

Personnel from the CRPF, Sashastra Seema Bal, and police are playing the roles of educators and counsellors for children in remote, strife-torn areas.

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GAON CONNECTION

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

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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

TEN MONTHS ago when *Gaon Connection* launched its long term project, Teacher Connection, I expected us to document stories of 'regular' teachers, with B.Ed (Bachelor of Education) degrees, who teach at government or private schools.

But as our reporters and community journalists fanned out across the country, including remote tribal pockets, we received a myriad of stories of educators, many of whom may not professionally qualify as teachers, but are doing great service towards education by securing the future of children of some of the most marginalised communities.

You will be surprised to know that some of these teachers are people in uniform!

Personnel from the CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force), Sashastra Seema Bal, and police are not only guarding our borders and ensuring our security, but are also being teachers in the far flung locations where they are posted. Many of these areas are strife-torn and the children are first generation learners.

For instance, in Khunti district in Jharkhand, personnel of the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) regularly teach rural children at the Birsa Awasiya Uchcha Vidyalaya, a residential school in Ulihatu village. SSB 26 Battalion camp is located in the village.

Another man in uniform, Vikas Kumar Pandey, assistant commandant with the CRPF, has set up public libraries in Bihar and Naxal-affected areas of Jharkhand that are visited by local children, and which help ignite young minds and keep them away from anti-social activities.

A couple of years ago, in 2018, responding to a call by people of remote Saranda forest villages in West Singhbhum district, the CRPF personnel were deputed on 'class duty' in rural schools so that students did not suffer due to a strike of para teachers in Jharkhand.


CRPF jawans took charge of teaching students at Ranchi's Jagannathpur Government Middle School, one of the biggest government middle schools in the city, when teaching activities were severely compromised due to the para-teachers strike.

This issue of *Teacher Connection* magazine is dedicated to troops who are also teachers.

Jai Hind!

Nidhi Jamwal

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 @JamwalNidhi

Personnel from the CRPF, Sashastra Seema Bal, and police add one more dimension to their selfless service to the country. They are playing the roles of mentors, educators and counsellors for children in remote, strife-torn areas.

FOR A SECURE TOMORROW



GAON CONNECTION

E DUCATION IS not a compartmentalised matter. At least it should not be. Learning can happen anywhere, anytime and in any condition.

And in areas where access to conventional educational institutions can get difficult or even impossible, there are those who may not be 'qualified teachers' but who are doing remarkable things to shape young minds.

Uniformed personnel, whether they be from the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force (BSF), the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), or the local police, are playing the roles of teachers, mentors and counsellors. They are bringing light, direction and hope to young people, especially in places that are remote, geographically, or due to strife.

These are forces that go where others usually wouldn't, be it in deserts, forests, or other farflung and often inhospitable terrain.

In Panna, Madhya Pradesh, a police station at a village called Brijpur about 30 kilometres (kms) away from the district headquarters has become an unlikely hub of learning. Why? Because a sub-inspector there, Barkhat Singh Thakur, has set up a library at the police station and children from nearby villages and even not-so-near-villages come there to sit and read or even borrow books to read back home.



More than 150 children come to Brijpur's Vidyadan Pustakalay every day to read books, study and get coached for examinations they plan to crack.

But, the Vidyadan Pustakalay is much more than a library. The sub-inspector, who was a teacher himself before he put on his uniform, realised that many children in the area were unable to reach schools and he decided to hold classes at a derelict building in the precinct that he refurbished with the permission and encouragement of his superior officers.

Today more than 150 children come there every day to read books, study and get coached for examinations they plan to crack. Two young people from the area who were giving tuitions already were asked to take classes at the Vidyalaya and Thakur himself takes classes.

The library and the surroundings are clean, green and conducive to learning and playing. It is about providing the environment all children should have irrespective of caste, creed or economic status, sub-inspector Thakur believes.

Something similar is happening about 800 kms away in Ulihatsu village in Jharkhand where Birsa Munda, the freedom fighter from a tribal community, was born in 1875. In the very same village, today, the personnel of the Sashastra Seema Bal are freeing young minds and teaching them to dream.

Personnel of the Sashastra Seema Bal have taken it upon themselves to hold career guidance classes for



IN ULIHATU VILLAGE, JHARKHAND, THE BIRTHPLACE OF FREEDOM FIGHTER BIRSA MUNDA IN 1875, PERSONNEL FROM THE SASHASTRA SEEMA BAL ARE NOW NURTURING YOUNG MINDS, INSPIRING THEM TO DREAM

children, who because of where they live, are not aware of what the world can offer them.

The assistant commandant of the SSB stationed there, Suman Santosh Masule, said his men are living up to the force's motto of Seva, Suraksha, Bandhutva and pledged to serve, protect and

offer friendship to the people, most of them from tribal communities, who have been living on the edge of terror for years in the Naxal-active area.

Providing a conducive environment to the children of the troubled area is a big part of their service. The personnel keep the youth updated about several examinations and courses they could take, help them to apply for them and tell them of the various careers they could take up after school.

Naxal-active villages, that are already remote, fall deeper into neglect and poverty, and children bear the brunt of it, as they are usually cut off from any kind of positive stimulation to their minds.

The SSB holds hockey and football matches with the children in the area, spend time with them listening to them speak of their dreams and aspirations and tell them that they can do a lot with their lives. At the same time they warn the young people about staying away from substance abuse as it could destroy them.

Information and education about career options, conversations, advice and counselling can be the game changer to young people living in the remote villages, the assistant commandant says. It is perhaps the best kind of tribute to pay Birsa Munda.



(Top) SSB personnel conducting class at Birsa Awasiya Uchha Vidyalaya, Ulihatu; (left) CRPF Assistant Commandant Vikas Kumar Pandey inaugurated a library at Roam Camp in West Singhbhum, Jharkhand.



Another man in uniform, Vikas Kumar Pandey of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) set up a library in Parsia village in Buxar district in Bihar. The area had never seen anything like it before.

The community library is free for girls and for school students, and college students have to pay a nominal subscription. His own struggle with getting books when he was growing up was a catalyst to this the assistant commandant CRPF, who is now posted in Madhya Pradesh.

Whenever he found himself posted to remote areas, especially those where the inhabitants lived under constant threat and trauma, Pandey set up libraries, sometimes deep in

dense forests.

The assistant commandant CRPF said his mission has been to make books available to rural students, especially those residing in remote villages in Bihar, and in hotbeds of Naxal activity in Jharkhand began soon after he joined the CRPF in 2015.

He established a library named Mahamana Public Library at a rented house in Bhariar market near his native Hemdapur village in Chanda panchayat, Bihar, in August 2016.

Officers and jawans of the CRPF gave generously, either in kind with furniture and books or in cash to keep the libraries working. Pandey himself spends out of his pocket to ensure these centres of information,

learning and knowledge continue to function.

In September 2017, the CRPF officer set out on a four-day Jagriti bicycle yatra from Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh to Buxar in Bihar to educate villagers about the importance of books in human life.

A year later, in 2018-19, a CRPF camp was set up in the Roam area in West Singhbhum, Jharkhand, which was notorious for Naxal activities. Pandey was in-charge of the camp. He found a damaged and abandoned building that he cleaned up and repaired and converted it into a small library for rural students nearby.

These are the people in uniform who defend our borders, maintain peace and enforce law and order. But they are also stepping up to change lives for the better, bring light and hope to communities by being their friends, philosophers and mentors. They are creating an environment where the young people can flourish and improve their own lives and make the world a better place for others too. ■



Roy organises open-air classes in the village to reach out to more children and help them develop an interest in science.

CHANCHAL SINGHA ROY

A Teacher In The Andamans Is Making His Students ‘Conservators’

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

MOHIT KUMAR Roy knows all about the mangrove forests in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The 15-year-old son of a local plumber can also list down names of all the rivers in the islands in no time.

“Chanchal sir makes us do various projects on biodiversity, nature and wildlife conservation. He also organises skits in the school so as to make us understand the topics,” the student of Government Senior Secondary School in Kadamtala village of Rangat tehsil of north and middle Andaman, told *Gaon Connection*. The village is located 77 kilometres from Port Blair.

Chanchal Singha Roy, a general science teacher at the school, constantly finds ways to connect his students, most of whom come from economically weaker and marginalised communities, with their local environment on the islands — the forests, river systems, and wildlife.

Conservation of the islands’ rich biodiversity is the 53-year-old teacher’s priority. “Andaman and Nicobar Islands are rich in biodiversity but they also need to be protected by those who live here. Most of the students who study in our school belong to fisher families. I follow a place-based approach which includes

things like mapping natural resources, and projects that help them understand their environment in a better way,” Roy told *Gaon Connection*.

Having lived in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for three generations now, Roy feels blessed to be teaching at a rural school in India’s most remote Union Territory. “My father was also a teacher and so is my wife. There has always been an academic environment in my family,” told Roy.

The school where he teaches has classes from Nursery to Class 12 with an estimated student strength of 500. Roy teaches science to classes six to tenth. The school was established in 1979 and Roy has been teaching here since 2018. Roy has taught the students to map their villages, iden-

tify the ecological hotspots and mark out areas that need environmental care and protection.

“This way I tend to create a healthy relationship with my students and also make the class interactive,” said Roy. Roy’s teaching methods have ensured children from far flung villages come to the school to study.

For instance, 12-year-old Aditya Ram, a student of class five, daily walks five kilometres through the forest, to come to school to study. “I also daily cross a small stream whose bridge is broken. It is sometimes scary but what I learn at the school makes me want to take this path to reach school,” Ram told *Gaon Connection*. “I want to grow up to become a teacher like Roy sir,” he added.

Mohit Kumar, the 15-year-old student of class 10th, lives in Kadamtala village, around two kilometres from the school. “We have made a big map of the science centre at our school. Mapping also helps us understand the different areas of the village. We have also learned about mangrove ecosystems and various names of the rivers situated in our union territory.”

Teacher Roy extends education beyond the classroom with outdoor activities emphasizing nature, conservation, and photography. On Sundays and holidays, he conducts open-air science classes in remote villages.

HAVING LIVED IN THE ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS FOR THREE GENERATIONS NOW, ROY FEELS BLESSED TO BE TEACHING AT A RURAL SCHOOL IN INDIA’S MOST REMOTE UNION TERRITORY



A Science Teacher in Tripura is Helping Prevent Child Marriages

SAYANTANI DEB

PRIYANKA NATH who belongs to Siddhinagar, a remote village in South Tripura, never ever thought she would one day be pursuing a PhD at IIT Indore in Madhya Pradesh, over 2,700 kilometres away from home.

"It is solely due to Santosh Nath sir that I have come this far and now I am doing my PhD. He convinced my parents and took me to various science competitions while I was a student at Chottakhola Higher Secondary School in Tebaria, where he was the science teacher," Priyanka told *Gaon Connection*.

"I come from a village where the idea of a girl pursuing higher education was unimaginable. But, with Sir's support and encouragement, I was able to break the taboo and get admission at such a prestigious institution," she added.

The science teacher she refers to in such glowing terms is Santosh Nath, who is not only spreading the joy of learning science among rural students in Tripura but also fighting social ills, such as early marriage and superstitions that prevail in rural areas in the northeastern state.

The 58-year-old teacher started teaching when he was in his 20s, and

has ever since done everything he possibly can to encourage scientific curiosity amongst his pupils. His first job as a teacher was in 1990 at Puran Rajbari High School in South Tripura in the Rajnagar Block, and was then transferred to Chottakhola Higher Secondary School, in Tebaria in South Tripura, in 1996. That is where he taught Priyanka Nath. In 2018, Nath was transferred to South Mirzapur High School in Belonia, where he now serves as the head teacher.

He established a small laboratory within the premises of Chottakhola Higher Secondary School where he showed his students scientific experiments. Nath designed various 3D models. He used them to calculate the

Nath began teaching in his 20s and has consistently worked to foster scientific curiosity among his students ever since. SAYANTANI DEB

rate of photosynthesis under different coloured lights, to explain geometric shapes, demonstrate the colours of light, explain Newton's laws, explore the structure of DNA, and much more. The science teacher designed the models with locally available materials like rod, cement, pipe plastic pipe, besides scrap metal and so on.

"I encourage all my students to participate in various state, regional, and national-level science fairs and exhibitions. The students not only participated but also brought laurels to the school, district, and state," the teacher, who received the National Teacher Award in 2022, said with pride.

Nath also took on the challenge of preventing child marriages in villages where he has been posted. "When I took charge at South Mirzapur High School in Belonia, I was shocked to see as many as 20-25 girls between the ages of 12 and 15 years being forced into marriage," he recalled.

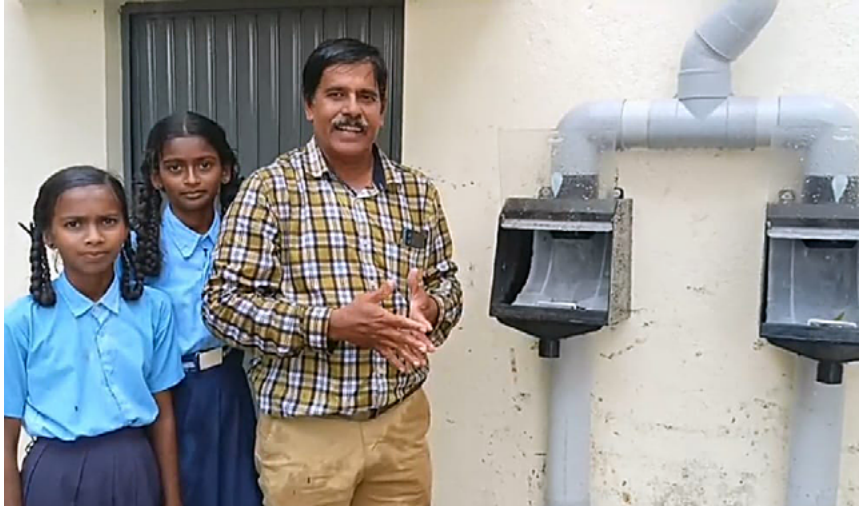
The science teacher sought the assistance of the district administration and established the 'Balika Mancha' to educate girls about the harmful effects of child marriage. This year, there have been no incidents of child marriage in the school, he said. Balika Mancha includes girls from grades 6 to 10 who raise awareness amongst the people about various social issues including harmful impacts of early marriage.

Sonali Das, a 15-year-old class 9 student, said she would always be grateful to her teachers for rescuing her from being married off. "About two months ago, my marriage was arranged and I felt helpless. I sought Nath Sir's help. Without wasting any time, he met my parents and persuaded them to cancel the marriage and allow me to continue my education," Sonali told *Gaon Connection*.

Nath is viewed as a father figure, said Manika Majumdar, a senior teacher and chairperson of Balika Mancha. "Under his guidance, female students feel safe and more secure. They look on him as a saviour who will always extend protection to them," she added.

BALIKA MANCHA INCLUDES GIRLS FROM GRADES 6 TO 10 WHO RAISE AWARENESS AMONGST THE PEOPLE ABOUT VARIOUS SOCIAL ISSUES INCLUDING HARMFUL IMPACTS OF EARLY MARRIAGE.

Catch Water Where it Falls is a Headmaster's Mantra



Rao has been actively promoting environmental awareness, particularly water conservation. To execute the rainwater harvesting plan at his school, the headmaster got in touch with Bengaluru-based Biome Environmental Solutions.

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

SINCE JUNE this year, with the onset of the monsoon season, Government Model Higher Primary School in Kora village in Tumakuru district of Karnataka has been capturing every drop of rain that fell from the sky on the school premises located over 70 kilometres from the state capital Bengaluru.

Today, the rural school with 208 children studying in classes one to seven has sufficient water to use for its cooking, gardening, cleaning and drinking purposes. For drinking and cooking, the harvested rainwater is filtered with the help of RO (reverse osmosis) so that it is clean and safe to drink for the students and staff.

The credit for making the school self-sufficient in water goes to Madhusudan Rao, headmaster at the school, who thought up a plan to capture, store, treat and use rainwater in his school. In a changing climate, with rainfall patterns changing, harvesting every drop of rainwater that falls on the ground is the need of the hour.

"I wanted to set up a rainwater harvesting system in the school. It made so much sense because it is cost effective, and promotes both



THE RAINWATER SYSTEM WAS SET UP IN JUNE. BY AUGUST, IT PROVIDED AMPLE WATER FOR COOKING, GARDENING, CLEANING, AND DRINKING, WITH FILTRATION FOR DRINKING

water and energy conservation," the 57-year-old headmaster told *Gaon Connection*.

To execute the rainwater harvesting plan at his school, the headmaster got in touch with Bengaluru-based Biome Environmental

Solutions, which works on ecological architecture and intelligent water and sanitation designs.

"First of all with the help of Biome, we identified our catchment area to capture rainwater and then started digging to collect raindrops that fall within our school premises. We now have one tank, which has the capacity of 19,250 litres, and stores rainwater," explained Rao. This much water can meet the school's water needs for two months.

Explaining how the rainwater harvesting system at the school works, Shivananda R S, a team leader at Biome, said: "We calculate sump [storage tank] capacity based on the rooftop area available for harvesting. The first one millimetre of rainwater which washes the terrace is let out through the first rain separator controlled by a valve."

"Afterwards the cleaner water is passed through a masonry or wall mounted filter and stored in a rainwater sump. The stored rainwater is then pumped to an overhead tank and reused," he added.

The rainwater harvesting system was installed in June this year. By the end of August, there was enough water for the school to use for its cooking, gardening, cleaning and drinking purposes. The water is filtered before using for drinking purposes.

According to Shivananda, the school harvests 560 kilo litres (KL) of water out of which 280 KL is stored and reused, and 280 KL is recharged annually.

The entire project of installing the rainwater harvesting system in school has been a learning process for the students too. Headmaster Rao ensured that the students watched and participated in the installation of the system.

"When the plant was being set up, we were told about rainwater harvesting and how it had huge advantages. Rao Sir told us how it was important to conserve water and not squander it so that we could avoid a water crisis in the future," Sandhya Rani, a 13-year-old student of class 7 told *Gaon Connection*. "We learnt how water can be reused for our day-to-day activities such as flushing of toilets, cleaning, gardening and cooking," she added.

Kitchen Garden as a Classroom in Bageshwar

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

NEERAJ PANT carefully monitors the growth of the seeds he planted a month ago. There are bottle gourds, pumpkins, cucumbers, potatoes and brinjals he has sowed and he smiles his delight as he spots some of them sprouting small leaves or flowers.

The 47-year-old Pant is a school teacher at the Junior High School located in Rauliana village in Bageshwar district, Uttarakhand. He teaches social science to students of classes six, seven and eight. But, his heart lies in educating children about farming and respecting the food farmers in the country grow.

"I was saddened to see so many of my students thought of farming and gardening as something of a menial job. I wanted to change that percep-



In the Junior High School a social science teacher believes that having a kitchen garden will ensure students have a good nutritious meal. NEERAJ PANT

tion in them," the teacher told *Gaon Connection*.

Pant has taught at this school for about eight years, and in 2015, he

hit upon the idea of starting a kitchen garden in the school. Ever since then, about 200 students have taken part in this gardening initiative. They have sown, watered and harvested the vegetables that they cultivated in the school garden. Tending the school kitchen garden has become a part of their daily activities at school.

"The vegetables that we harvest supplement the midday meals. Freshly harvested vegetables straight from our garden goes into making the lunch menu extra tasty and nutritious," he said.

Pant believes that having a kitchen garden and growing vegetables and fruits that make it to the children's food is a way of ensuring they have a good nutritious meal. "Also, growing food teaches the children about the source of their food, how difficult and exacting cultivating fruits and vegetables can be, and how gardening is crucial to the ecology and their health," he pointed out.

A TEACHER BUYS HIS STUDENTS A SCHOOL BUS

SALIM ATTAR

EVERY MORNING at around 6:30 AM, the sheer sight of the grey mini-bus brings a smile on the face of Bhavna, a 14-year-old student who lives on the periphery of Dharna village in Rajasthan's Balotra district.

"Since my house is situated amidst the agricultural fields, away from the village, it was difficult for me to go to the school on time. I used to go to the school on foot and often got late. My parents were also not very keen to send me to the school. I was thinking of dropping out of the school due to the hardships," the young teenager told *Gaon Connection*.

"But ever since my school got a bus, I can easily commute to the school and never get late for my classes," she



A number of children in villages neighbouring the public school have benefited ever since the educational institute started a mini-bus.

SALIM ATTAR

said. The distance between Bhavna's house in Dharna village to the Rajasthan Public Upper Primary School where she studies is three kilometres.

Like Bhavna, a number of children in villages neighbouring the public school have benefited ever since the educational institute started a mini-bus, which every morning picks up children from their village homes and brings them to school. After the school gets over, the students are dropped back to their homes.

And the credit for this goes to Bhabhuta Ram, the director cum teacher at the private school. Ram

spent Rs 16 lakh from his earnings from his agricultural fields to finance the mini-bus for rural kids.

"We started a bus service in 2019 to help students like Bhavna. Many of these students live almost twelve kilometres away from the school. They had to walk all their way to the school, crossing sand dunes in the scorching heat of the desert," narrated Ram. "Now, such students can easily come to the school in the bus and nothing hinders them from studying anymore," he added.

TEACHERS CAN INSPIRE STUDENTS TO LOVE THEIR COUNTRY AND RESPECT SOLDIERS BY INCORPORATING LESSONS ON THE NATION'S HISTORY, VALUES, AND THE SACRIFICES MADE BY SOLDIERS.

SALUTING THE SOLDIERS

OUR SOLDIERS, seamen and airmen valiantly guard our borders every day to uphold the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation. They ensure we breathe the air of freedom. They willingly make the ultimate sacrifice when called upon to do so in order to uphold our values and protect our citizens.

To honour their steadfast dedication and acknowledge their brave acts, Gallantry Awards have been instituted. These awards are symbolic of a soldier's selfless sacrifice and heroic valour in the battlefield.

THESE AWARDS INCLUDE



PARAM VIR CHAKRA



MAHA VIR CHAKRA



VIR CHAKRA



ASHOKA CHAKRA



KIRTI CHAKRA

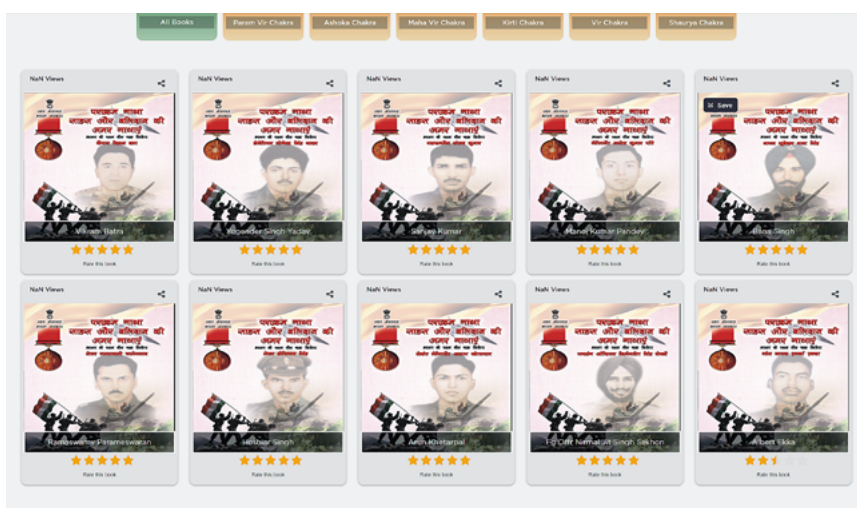


SHAURYA CHAKRA

The screenshot shows the official website for Gallantry Awards, Ministry of Defence, Government of India. The main banner is for 'VEER GATHA 3.0' with the tagline 'Tales of valour by young minds' and 'Inspiring School Children with Stories of War Heroes and Brave Hearts'. The website includes a navigation bar with links like HOME, VIRTUAL MUSEUM, VEERGATHA, AWARDEES, GALLERY, GALLANTRYEDIA, EVENTS, E-MAGAZINE, E-BOOKS, and WHATS NEW. There are also logos for the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Education, along with a G20 India 2023 logo. At the bottom, there is a QR code for visitor counts, a virtual museum link, and a call to action to register for free to pay tributes to selected heroes.



THE PORTAL also had motivational videos such as Kargil Vijay Diwas Film, Lion Of Ladakh, Ode to Op Vijay, etc. These videos can be shown to students to motivate them to serve their country.



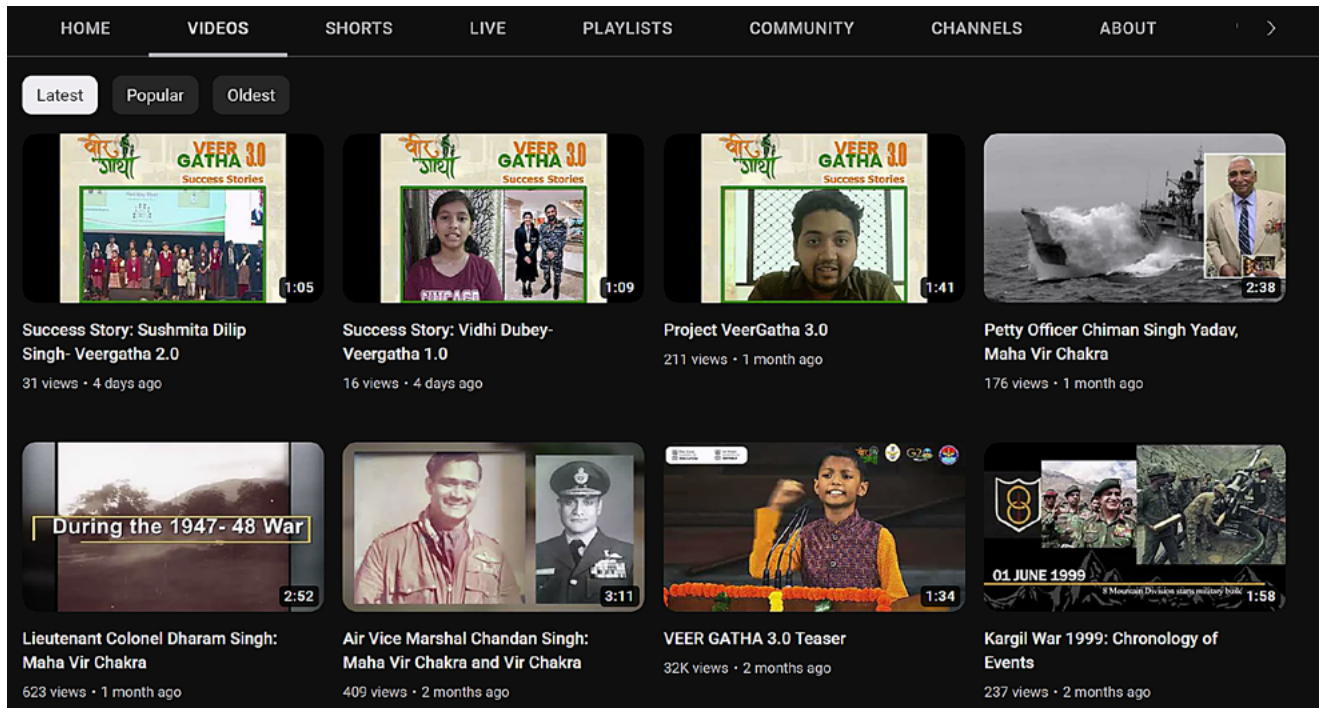
THE PORTAL also has a Digital Library with free-to-read books (in Hindi) on lives of soldiers who have made supreme sacrifice for their country. Read out these stories to your students.

RESOURCE ROOM

THE PORTAL regularly conducts events and competitions for children like quizzes, selfie competitions, video, caption and photo of the week contests.

AND LAST but not the least, the portal has a Gallery of Gallants — A Virtual Museum. Why not take your students on a tour to this museum?

YOU CAN also make your students watch videos on gallantry awardees on the YouTube channel of these awards. There are video stories of Kargil War 1999, Major Somnath Sharma, 1971 Indo-Pak War, 1962 Sino-India War, etc.



VEERGATHA

THE GOVERNMENT of India has launched 'Veer Gatha Project' to inspire school children by making them aware with stories of war heroes and brave hearts. The project is aimed to disseminate the details of acts of bravery and life stories of the officers/personnel of the armed forces.

Students are encouraged to participate in this initiative by registering at the portal. Follow this link to register your students. Prizes and certificates await them!



At This School in Assam, Children Earn While They Learn

SAYANTANI DEB
GUWAHATI, ASSAM

IN 2016, Akshar Foundation started a school at the outskirts of Guwahati in Assam for students, who come from underprivileged families. At this school, which is based on Mahatma Gandhi's Nai Talim concept, children are grouped based on skill levels rather than age.

Along with imparting education, the school teaches these children skills such as sewing, carpentry, gardening, printing, upcycling and recycling plastic products. The children also earn while they learn these skills so that they can support their families.

'Earning While Learning' is the motto of this school, which started with 10 children and today has 110 students with almost an equal number of boys and girls in classes one to 12. Akshar Foundation's school is a changemaker as 14 schools in the northeastern state have already adopted its model, which is likely to scale up to 25 this year and 100 next year.

Alaka Sarma, the founder of the school, explained the reason behind the unconventional method of teaching at the school. "We established this school to spread the light of education for the underprivileged community at Pamohi on the outskirts of Guwahati, where poverty is rampant and literacy scarce," said Alaka Sarma, a former professor and two-term MLA.

But, providing education to the underprivileged comes with its unique set of challenges, as the founder of the school found out. Many of the children worked as rag-pickers, did odd jobs, or took care of their younger siblings at home. To address this concern, the school decided to follow skill-based education.

"In many families in Pamohi, both parents work as daily wage labourers, while older girls take on house-



'Earning While Learning' is the motto of this school in Assam, which started with 10 children and today has 110 students.

hold responsibilities and look after younger siblings," Parmita Sarma, co-founder of the school, told *Gaon Connection*. "It was unthinkable that time was spent in school when the child can be earning to augment family income. The refrain in these families was that girls should stay at home and they don't need an education," Parmita Sarma added.

hold responsibilities and look after younger siblings," Parmita Sarma, co-founder of the school, told *Gaon Connection*. "It was unthinkable that time was spent in school when the child can be earning to augment family income. The refrain in these families was that girls should stay at home and they don't need an education," Parmita Sarma added.

Akshar Foundation decided to adopt an unconventional teaching method where students got grouped based on skill levels rather than age. School authorities met the parents and convinced them that their children could acquire an education and earn a living while they did so.

The school has been running successfully for the past seven years based on Mahatma Gandhi's Nai Talim Education Philosophy that promotes the integration of knowledge and work. Students at Akshar Foun-

dation learn skills such as sewing, carpentry, gardening, printing, upcycling and recycling plastic products, and more.

The school ensures a child gets paid for every work they do. "Students from level 5 to level 12 actively participate in school development activities for which they earn points which are then converted into money that is deposited into their bank accounts. During the lockdown, many students who had earned this money bought themselves smartphones," Gaurav Das, a senior teacher at the school, told *Gaon Connection*.

A student earns Rs 35 per hour for carpentry, printing and landscaping work, Rs 40 per hour for segregating of waste, Rs 5 to Rs 25 per half an hour for teaching the younger students, and between Rs 10 and Rs 15 rupees for every eco-brick they make. These eco-bricks are made of waste plastics which students bring to the school every Thursday and then recycle it. This way they are also addressing a burning problem in their neighbourhood.



There are around 3,000 books including textbooks, books for competitive exams, poems, general knowledge, literature, science and picture books. MANOHAR CHAMOLI

Inculcating Reading Habits in the Children of Pauri Garhwal

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

BEFORE MANOHAR Chamoli turned a government school teacher, he was a journalist for over one decade. He used to report on civic issues and write for *Rashtriya Sahara* in Roorkee in Uttarakhand. But, the resident of Palam village in Tehri Garhwal felt he wasn't doing enough for the larger community in his region. And turned a teacher in 2005.

Since then he has been teaching at various government schools in the villages of the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. At present, 47-year-old Chamoli is posted at the Government Inter College in Kewars village in Pauri Garhwal, about 200 kilometres from the state capital Dehradun. He teaches Sanskrit and Hindi to the students of class 8, 9, and 10.

When Chamoli came to this school, he found that the books were barely taken out of the cupboards except some textbooks that were

available for the students. So he took it upon himself to organise books of different genres and make the students read them regularly.

"I had taught at many schools before coming to this school at Kewars village but the situation was poor here, as I found that there was no formal library in the school, and the books were not maintained properly," Chamoli told *Gaon Connection*.

Chamoli said that he had a dream — to watch his students read — and have hundreds of books stacked up properly in small cupboards in the classrooms. And, he is happy to be able to realise it. And has found various ways and means to keep the books flowing to the village school.

There are around 3,000 books including textbooks, books for competitive exams, poems, general knowledge, literature, science and picture books. "There are various publishing houses like Eklavya in Bhopal who send us Hindi literature and science

magazines monthly. There are some word puzzles and questions in the magazine for the children. Whoever answers it correctly gets a six month subscription of the magazine," said Chamoli.

The students at the school are mostly children of farmers, labourers, drummers, craftsmen who do clay work. Their children don't get the environment to read books at home and are majorly involved in other chores such as helping their parents in farming, poultry, wood cutting and grass cutting.

"I thought that if this young generation of village kids gets educated and develops reading habits, then they would be able to mould their future as books are the ultimate source of knowledge," the teacher said.

"I love reading picture books because they have so many beautiful pictures and different colours. Whenever I am done with my class work I go and pick my favourite story book in Hindi and read it in my free time," said 15-year-old Khushboo, a student of class 10. She lives in Kewars village and her father is a driver.

"I remember the first time when sir persuaded me to read books I couldn't finish even one story but now I can read up to five to six stories in a day and I love reading Panchatantra stories," she added.



Sumi Das founded the Moitri Sanjog Society in 2012, which runs a special Gurukul in Cooch Behar, North Bengal, to provide education to underprivileged children. The teachers and non-teaching staff at the Gurukul are also from the LGBTQIA+ community.

Transgender Run a Gurukul for Underprivileged Kids

DANISH IQBAL

SHE WAS barely 14 years old when Sumi Das left home. She does not want to speak about her life before that, but in the 20 years since then, she has done a lot.

"My life became really meaningful when I came to Cooch Behar, completed my Bachelors, and in 2012, founded the Moitri Sanjog Society that works for the welfare of the transgender community," Sumi, a transwoman, told *Gaon Connection*.

Her organisation runs a special gurukul in Cooch Behar in north Bengal to impart education to underprivileged children, and what makes the entire initiative stand out is the fact that majority of the teachers and caretakers at the gurukul are from the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and others) community.

It was during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2021, that Moitri Sanjog Society set up a gurukul at Ghughumari village in Cooch Behar, about 700 kilometres northeast of the state capital Kolkata.

"We began the gurukul in a room at our shelter for trans people, to ed-



ucate children whose parents are daily wage labourers and cannot afford to pay fees or pay for tuition," the 34-year-old narrated. "From the teachers to the cook who prepares the food for kids and the other non-teaching staff, most of them are transgender," she added.

There are 29 children who study at the gurukul. They are between the ages of five and 11 years. The children come to the gurukul after their regular government school hours. The gurukul welcomes them at 4 PM and they stay there till 7.30 PM.

"The children study for about an hour after which they learn dance, music, art and do yoga. Before they return home, they are served a nu-

tritious meal," said Sumi. The meal, which includes vegetables and chicken, is served free of cost to children who study at the gurukul.

According to her, the fact that they are given a good meal keeps the children focused on their learning. At the gurukul, the children have regular tests to see how they are progressing and their guardians are kept abreast of how they are doing in the gurukul. Regular parent-teacher meetings are also held.

The gurukul has two teachers, Isobar Chandar and Tamanna Dey, and a cook Subha Das, all three of them transgender, who take care of the children. "I like teaching children, and I especially enjoy teaching them mathematics," Chandra, one of the teachers, told *Gaon Connection*. The teacher gets free boarding and lodging at the gurukul besides a salary of Rs 8,000 a month.

"Many of the children who come here are either without parents or are children of sex workers. Giving them an opportunity to study is most satisfying," said Chandar, who has been associated with the Moitri Sanjog Trust since its inception, but became a teacher at the gurukul in 2021.

AN MBA GRADUATE FROM KOLKATA RUNS A COMMUNITY LIBRARY IN THE SPITI VALLEY

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

THE SUN had just emerged after a downpour and Ruchi Dhona said she was painting murals on the walls of a small library where books jostled for space on shelves and cupboards.

Dhona is the founder of Let's Open A Book, a community library for children in Kaza, the sub divisional headquarters of the remote Lahaul and Spiti, a cold desert district in Himachal Pradesh which shares a border with the Tibet Autonomous region in China.

In Kaza, which is at a height of 11,980 ft above sea level, snow-clad peaks tower over streams. The community library has more than 2,500 books in Hindi, English and in the Tibetan language. There are books for beginners as well as adults. For the younger children there are cloth books, lift-the-flap books, musical books and so on while for the older children there are mystery and adventure books.

"I loved the Nancy Drew series when I grew up," laughed the 37-year-old Dhona. Let's Open A Book is a unique community library initiative in a back-of-beyond region of the country where educational facilities and learning opportunities for children are limited.

Dhona herself belongs to Kolkata in West Bengal and came to Spiti for the first time in 2017. She had just quit her corporate job. "I visited a few government schools here and the lack of storybooks in them remained in my mind. I decided that I would go



back to the valley to set up a library for the children there," she narrated.

She started working with government schools and in 2021, piloted a free community library project. Dhona returned to the valley and set up 'Let's Open A Book' for the children there. Every day, the library, which is housed in a rented place, is visited by children who pick up books of their choice, sit on the carpet and dhur-

Dhona feels that there is nothing that she would be doing other than running the community library because it makes her immensely happy and gives her satisfaction.

rie, and read the books at the library, without paying any fee.

Crowdfunding as well as donations from individuals from across the country has helped Dhona build up the library. "There are also publishers and booksellers like Kool-Skool and Tulika who sell us books at deep discounts. We set up a wish-list and people send us books from there for the library," she said.

Two librarians take turns to look after the library that is open throughout the year. The books do not just remain on the shelves, Dhona said. Many activities and projects are built around them and this has met with considerable success.

"We started a 100-book challenge in which we introduced the children to the different books in the library and asked them to come and read them. Whoever reads 100 books will be declared the winner and will get a bag as a prize," she said.

Dhona herself is an ardent lover of books and it was her grandfather who, she said, encouraged her to read when she was a child. She graduated from St Xaviers in Kolkata after which she pursued her MBA at Delhi. Dhona feels that there is nothing that she would be doing other than running the community library because it makes her immensely happy and gives her satisfaction.

THE COMMUNITY LIBRARY HAS MORE THAN 2,500 BOOKS IN HINDI, ENGLISH AND IN THE TIBETAN LANGUAGE. THERE ARE BOOKS FOR BEGINNERS AS WELL AS ADULTS.

Notebook Donation Drive is Boosting Education in Tribal Palghar

DANISH IQBAL

IN TRIBAL-DOMINATED Palghar district in Maharashtra, a lack of notebooks is becoming a hindrance in the education of the children. To address this problem, an annual Notebook Donation drive is making notebooks available to hundreds of tribal children who belong to economically weak families and study at government schools in the district. This Notebook Donation drive has been going on for the past 12 years.

"For twelve years now, we have been on a mission to supply notebooks to about 150 schools in the tribal taluka of Mokhada in Palghar. We raise money from like-minded friends, industrialists in the area and crowd fund this campaign through social media, so that children who come to school have enough notebooks to write on and learn," said Shraddha Shringarpure, CEO of a non-profit Diganta Swaraj Foundation, which runs this annual



The notebook donation drive that started in Mokhada, Palghar district, has now spread to schools in Nashik district too. SHRADDHA SHRINGARPURE

special drive.

"This year we distributed notebooks to about 2,500 children. We gave each child in classes one and two, three copies each. Those in classes three and four got five copies each, and students of class five received 12 copies each. Each copy costs us Rs 20," said Shringarpure.

According to her, these notebooks

served the children for a year. Since the Foundation began, we have distributed about 330,000 notebooks, she said.

The notebooks are making a difference in the education of tribal students. "Most of the children come from very poor families, a majority of them from tribal communities. Some of them are so poor that they cannot afford to buy notebooks. And, their parents are unlettered and do not see how notebooks can be so important in their wards' education," said Gaudke Dattu Vishnu, a teacher at the Zilla Parishad School in Bhen-dichapada village in Mokhada. "But, the children have responded so well to the fact that they have notebooks. Their attendance has gone up too," the teacher added.

Notebook Donation drive that started from Mokhada in Palghar district has not spread to schools in Nashik district too.

A Model Anganwadi Centre in Sonbhadra, Uttar Pradesh

DANISH IQBAL

VED PRAKASH Ojha took it upon himself to transform a dysfunctional anganwadi centre in his village Kon, that falls in Sonbhadra district, Uttar Pradesh. The anganwadi centre had no infrastructure or any facility at all to make the children who came there comfortable or cared for. The village inhabitants have no other option but to send the children there, as they are landless farmers or daily wage labourers.

Ojha decided to adopt the anganwadi early this year in February after the state government declared that anganwadi centres that were not functioning too well were free to be adopted by private individuals Ojha



Ved Prakash Ojha transformed the anganwadi center in his village Kon, investing time and money to make it a 'model anganwadi'. VED PRAKASH OJHA

stepped forward and has since spent time and money on it to turn it into a 'model anganwadi'.

"In January, this year, the govern-

ment announced that the dysfunctional anganwadi centres in the district can be adopted by private individuals. I decided to adopt the anganwadi in my village. The government has now declared the centre as a model anganwadi," Ojha told *Gaon Connection*.

"The condition of this anganwadi kendra was not good. Children sat on the floor and there was nothing to entertain them or keep them engaged. The sole anganwadi worker was mostly occupied with administrative duties and paperwork," he said.

Today, there are benches for the children to sit on, a smart television, audio-visual aids, and most importantly a nutritional breakfast for the kids. The enrollment at the anganwadi has gone up three fold since Ojha took it upon himself to revamp it and there are 60 children who come here to learn and play.

