

100

TALES OF TEACHERS TRANSFORMING EDUCATION IN RURAL INDIA



गाँव
कनेक्शन
YOUR CONNECTION WITH RURAL INDIA

Teacher
CONNECTION



THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
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BHARATIYA GRAMIN VIDYALAYA
www.graminschool.org

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Cover Illustration: Nidhi Jamwal

Based on the original art work of Malvika Raj.

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**GAON CONNECTION IS INDIA'S BIGGEST RURAL COMMUNICATION AND
INSIGHTS PLATFORM WITH PRESENCE IN 425 DISTRICTS OF INDIA.**

PUBLISHED BY

Gaon Connection Pvt Ltd

B, 2/62Q, Dr Akhilesh Das Gupta Marg, Vishal Khand 2, Vishal Khand,
Gomti Nagar, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh 226010

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TITLE	PAGE NO.
SECTION 1: BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY	1-34
STORY 1: A noted geologist turned his back on fame and returned home to set up a village school	2
STORY 2: When conversation with a cab driver led to a school being set up in Turtuk village, Ladakh	5
STORY 3: "I learnt to read and write at the age of fifteen. And I am a teacher today."	8
STORY 4: "It is nothing extraordinary that I've done. Every teacher should be able to do this."	10
STORY 5: "What have I achieved" – a rural primary school teacher often asks herself	12
STORY 6: The evergreen 'Bana Sir' of Kendrapara	14
STORY 7: She moved from Mumbai to a village in Kargil to follow her calling – Teaching	16
STORY 8: 'Music gave me a reason to live and now I share that joy with others'	19
STORY 9: Friendship goals in a rural school in Cuttack, Odisha	21
STORY 10: A teacher in a Naxalite-affected area transforms the village school, wins community's trust	23
STORY 11: The 'Seasonal Teachers' of Kashmir	11
STORY 12: A school teacher begins his day with taking a dip in spring water, with his students	28
STORY 13: A Sanskrit teacher at a village school helps children from Sindh feel at home	30
STORY 14: Growing their own food at school	32
SECTION 2: FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY AND NUMERACY	35-59
STORY 15: Spreading smiles in the classroom	36
STORY 16: Here comes the Big Book	39
STORY 17: A village school with a 'Parliament' and Prime Minister	41
STORY 18: The 'Jadui Pitara' works its magic in the classroom	44
STORY 19: A planned approach to classroom teaching	47
STORY 20: Creating a level playing field	50
STORY 21: What did you eat for breakfast?	53
STORY 22: Keeping students on the right track	56
STORY 23: The writing is on the wall	58
SECTION 3: REIMAGINING EDUCATION	59-116
STORY 24: Falling in love with maths and science	61
STORY 25: A village school breaks stereotypes of rural education	64

STORY 26: Tree top classrooms and millet cakes	67
STORY 27: Vocational courses in this village high school get students job ready	69
STORY 28: A 'Model' School in Kashmir streamlines its education processes with online tools	72
STORY 29: Amitabh Bachchan's KBC finds a new avatar at a govt school in Mirzapur	75
STORY 30: Drama and theatre in the classroom	77
STORY 31: It is 'A for Abdul Kalam' in this gurukul in Nalanda, Bihar	80
STORY 32: Making space for Assamese culture in modern education	83
STORY 33: Gaon Mitra bring drop-out tribal kids back to school	86
STORY 34: Big lessons from small beginnings	89
STORY 35: Of smart classrooms, news corner and judo medals	92
STORY 36: A cycle of change	94
STORY 37: From Mini-Chambal to a centre of learning	96
STORY 38: Learning with the puppets	98
STORY 39: Lessons set in music	100
STORY 40: A teacher in Kashmir creates a wealth of memories from waste	102
STORY 41: A teacher drives change in her school and the village community by roping in mothers	105
STORY 42: Artificial Intelligence lends a helping hand to a government school teacher	108
STORY 43: Smart Classes make appeal to first generation learners from tribal families	110
STORY 44: A cool school in the Thar desert	112
STORY 45: A screening success	115
SECTION 4: A CLASS APART	117-134
STORY 46: He makes a place in the sun for children with intellectual disabilities	118
STORY 47: A wheelchair bound teacher is changing lives of children with special needs in Kashmir	121
STORY 48: Music to ears	124
STORY 49: Reading the signs	126
STORY 50: Kindling hope in children with special needs in Barmer	129
STORY 51: A visually impaired teacher illuminated the lives of children of tea-garden workers	132
SECTION 5: RURAL LIBRARIES	135-158
STORY 52: A million dreams are taking shape in Karnataka's rural libraries	136

STORY 53: The fondest corner of a government primary school	139
STORY 54: Libraries of opportunities	142
STORY 55: A classroom and a library in the ghats of Ganga	145
STORY 56: Library on a cart	147
STORY 57: The Jhola Pustakalay in Thar desert	149
STORY 58: Investing in the future: A book bank in Punjab	151
STORY 59: A village community library sows ideas of justice in Hardoi, UP	153
STORY 60: Dispelling darkness in Kishanganj, Bihar	156
SECTION 6: SPORTS STARS OF RURAL INDIA	159-173
STORY 61: Net winners at Khel Gaon in Rajasthan	160
STORY 62: Scoring goals in Ganderbal	163
STORY 63: So that they never walk in fear...	165
STORY 64: Sports and art go hand in hand for twin-brother teachers	167
STORY 65: Rural girls hop, skip and jump their way to sporting glory	169
STORY 66: Bringing the girls in	172
SECTION 7: OUT OF SYLLABUS	174-217
STORY 67: A teacher tackles alcoholism in a village to address absenteeism at school	175
STORY 68: A government teacher in a village school in Udaipur teaches child traffickers a lesson	178
STORY 69: A headmaster's crusade against child labour in tribal Jharkhand	181
STORY 70: A principal and a psychiatrist team up to spread awareness on mental health	184
STORY 71: A teacher holds 'exclusive' classes to educate rural girls about menstrual hygiene	187
STORY 72: Creating a level playing field for underprivileged civil service aspirants	190
STORY 73: A school teacher has planted nearly 5 million trees and inspired a generation of students	193
STORY 74: For the love of art and Nanpur village	196
STORY 75: A teacher brings glory to the Mewati language	199
STORY 76: Rural teachers double up as YouTubers in their efforts to spread education	202
STORY 77: From cruise ships to trains, a teacher is on a mission to give schools a facelift	205
STORY 78: A police thana turns into a centre for learning for rural children in Panna, MP	207
STORY 79: A principal ensures that kids who sold berries now study in a school	210

STORY 80: A rural school teacher has donated blood 88 times and is on a mission to save lives	212
STORY 81: Music to their ears	214
STORY 82: Periods talk with rural women	216
SECTION 8: EDUCATE. ENABLE. EMPOWER.	218-266
STORY 83: No timetable at 'Gurukulam'	219
STORY 84: Shiksha Rickshaw Abhiyan is spreading smiles and education	221
STORY 85: A security guard who runs Roofless School for children of daily wage workers	224
STORY 86: An affordable school for the children of factory workers and labourers	227
STORY 87: Hunar Ki Pathshala for children of the Korku tribe	229
STORY 88: When peers turn teachers to promote girls' education	232
STORY 89: Following his father's footsteps, a retd govt official sets up a school for orphans	235
STORY 90: Jeevan Shiksha Pahal – a school for children from tribal communities	238
STORY 91: Dream School: Where children from slums are encouraged to dream big	241
STORY 92: 'Jeevan Shalas' offer education to tribal children in Nandurbar, Maharashtra	244
STORY 93: The good samaritan	247
STORY 94: A farewell to alms	248
STORY 95: Keeping education on track	251
STORY 96: From rag picking to reading – a retd school teacher is transforming young lives	253
STORY 97: From dropouts to achievers – a village school is bridging the education gap	255
STORY 98: Only Re 1 admission fee in this school for kids from ragpicking families	258
STORY 99: The Bansa Community Library, where books and conversations inform people	260
STORY 100: For 'Rastar Master', where there's a wall, there's a way	263



PREFACE

COME FROM A family of teachers. My father and mother have both been teachers, my mother-in-law, both my aunts, my sister-in-law, the wives of three of my cousins – you throw a pen and it will land on a teacher in my family.

So I understand the world of our Teacher Connection project at a very personal level apart from my deep admiration and respect for teachers in general. I also know that if I wasn't doing all the diverse things I am getting an opportunity to do, I would have been a teacher. Um, that's wrong, actually, because in mentoring our Mandli of writers whose

stories I narrate nationally on radio, I already am a teacher. But some day, you shall certainly find me in a classroom, because my happiest time is spent around children and young people.

My parents last year celebrated the 50th anniversary of their wedding – but after a month, the anniversary of a cause that is bigger to them than everything, and that has bound our family in invisible ways. It was the 50th anniversary of the village school that both of them created in 1972, a month after getting married, in a small hut on a piece of land my father bought from his savings in Canada. They

named it Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya. My father Dr. S.B. Misra used to walk 12 kilometres to his school every day and it was his childhood dream that he would build a school near his village so that other students would not have to make that long walk. My mother was a teacher in the city – Lucknow – and she gave up all her city comforts to embrace village life and made her husband’s dream her own. Together, they have changed thousands of lives and even today, the biggest everyday joy of their lives is to silently admire the school campus they have built with my mother’s jewellery, my father’s savings, and resources of the school. They gave it all they had.

Teachers are among the most selfless people in the world. The Indian teacher, more so – the guru-shishya tradition is in our DNA, it has soaked our culture and values and worldview. Teachers give to their students all they know, expecting nothing in return. I am not saying that all teachers have this virtue, this secret sauce, this superpower. I am sure a very large number of teachers do it just as a source of livelihood – and fair enough. But there is an unsung majority of teachers who bring joy and hope and an uplifting spirit to the classroom every day – and are never celebrated.

Across India, hundreds of thousands of teachers have made small and big sacrifices, and make small and big contributions – some visible, most invisible – to their schools and their students every

day. These contributions shape lives, but they are never documented. Our longterm campaign “Teacher Connection” grows out of this eagerness, this hunger, to celebrate teachers every day – not just on Teacher’s Day.

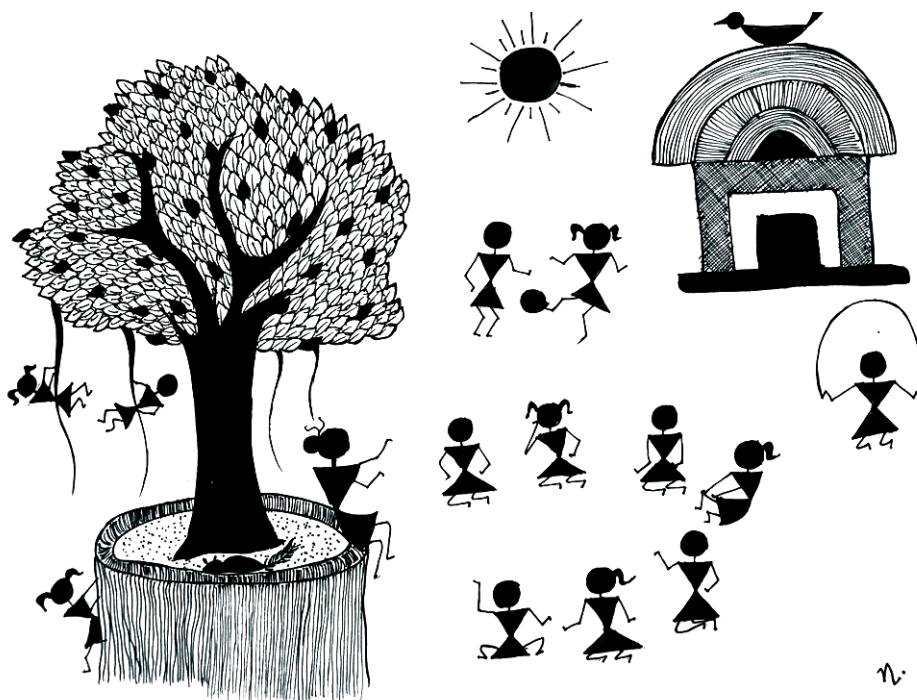
We at Gaon Connection hope that our efforts shall somewhere make a small contribution to bringing back to the Indian teacher the respect and position in society that they used to have earlier.

Come, let us go back to peep into the classrooms. Let us make our Teacher Connection. ▣

Neelesh Misra

Founder

Gaon Connection



Why Teacher Connection?

THIS BOOK HAS a hundred tales of teachers, and there is a tale behind putting this book together. So let me start with the latter first.

December 2022. Gaon Connection had just turned ten and it was the right time to look back at the vast body of work of India's biggest rural communication and insights platform, and the impact it has made on the lives of millions of people in rural India.

It was also time to pause and reflect, about the way ahead, and how better to create more impact, as Neelesh Misra,

founder of Gaon Connection, always keeps reminding us.

It was during an editorial meeting he spoke about the need to document stories – in video, text and audio formats – of teachers and educators in the villages of the country. He referred to it as the 'Teacher Connection'.

To be honest, my first response was less than enthusiastic and that was followed by a hundred questions – "Stories of rural teachers? Won't they be repetitive as most teachers do the same thing – teach? Will anyone want to read or watch

them? Will teachers share their stories with us considering how the media often vilifies them who teach in village schools with bare minimum resources?”

But Neelesh ji is OG, a visionary who can look ahead, and he also happens to be my boss. So on January 3 this year, on revolutionary teacher Savitribai Phule’s birth anniversary, Gaon Connection launched its long term project – Teacher Connection.

Teachers build nations but they are not acknowledged enough. Teachers in rural India fight battles every day and win invisible wars, but no one applauds them.

Teacher Connection is Gaon Connection’s effort to celebrate teachers. Through this project, we are informing, documenting, and archiving at one place (Teacher Connection section on Gaon Connection’s homepage) all the good practices of teaching and learning, innovations in education, importance of functional literacy and numeracy (FLN), modern teaching aids, and resources that can help teachers become better educators. The best bit of this campaign is that our content is created with an active participation of the teachers themselves.

As the Teacher Connection project started to unfold and stories of teachers from far flung villages and tribal regions in the country started pouring in, we became aware of a whole new world

and the immense opportunities to impact millions of young lives.

Using Gaon Connection’s biggest strength – community resource persons, community journalists, network of contributors and freelancers spread out in 425 districts of the country – we met teachers in some of the remotest locations in the country – a village in Kargil, a tribal hamlet in Nagaland, an adivasi village in a tiger reserve of Panna in Madhya Pradesh, and more.

India has over 640,930 villages and almost each village has a primary school. That is why it comes as no surprise that India’s teaching workforce is amongst the largest in the world.

Nearly 9.7 million primary and secondary school teachers form the backbone of our education system, which has 1.5 million schools and 248 million students enrolled from Grade 1 to Grade 12.

Of the total schools in the country, 84 per cent are located in rural areas. And 69 per cent of our schools are run by various state governments that employ about 51 per cent of the teaching workforce.

Despite their huge strength, how little we know about our teaching workforce. Teachers are to be found in the deepest, farthest pockets of the country. They educate, groom and influence their students to become upright citizens of our country. But we never see their faces

or hear their voices.

Thanks to the Teacher Connection project, every day my team and I now wait to see what new and inspiring story we will read, edit and publish about the doughty teachers.

As the project gathered steam and thousands of teachers joined our campaign, we decided to start an e-magazine to further build the voice of the teaching workforce and also offer teachers resource materials and online toolkits to become better teachers. Our monthly e-magazine, *Teacher Connection*, was launched in March this year.

Since then, we have been releasing the magazine every month with each issue focusing on a key theme – YouTuber rural teachers, rural sports coaches, teachers of children with special needs, and so on. All the issues of the e-magazine are available for a free download on our website (<https://www.gaonconnection.com/surveys-reports>).

This book – *100 Tales of Teachers Transforming Education in Rural India* – is the next step in our journey with the 9 million plus teaching workforce of the country.

This book, divided into eight broad sections, is a unique document not just for teachers but for anyone and everyone who is related to, or is interested in the education sector.

Education is the most important tool for the transformation of society. Look back at your journey of life and your achievements, and you will find that there were teachers along the way who cheered you and helped you get to where you are today.

It takes a village to raise a child and who knows it better than teachers who are not only silently building young lives but also bringing about social change and leading the country towards true development.

Hope you enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed putting it together. □

Nidhi Jamwal

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SECTION 1

BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

TEACHERS IN RURAL INDIA ARE LEAVING NO STONE UNTURNED TO IMPART EDUCATION
DESPITE CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT AND LIMITED RESOURCES



STORY 1

A noted geologist turned his back on fame and returned home to set up a village school

His is a story of dream, hope, grit, sacrifice and triumph. The hardships that he faced in accessing education in his childhood were so deeply etched in his psyche that Dr Shiv Balak Misra, a noted geologist, gave up his comfortable job in Canada and returned to his village in Uttar Pradesh to set up a school.

GAON CONNECTION

DR SHIV BALAK MISRA, a noted geologist and scientist, is 83 years old. But he still remembers those dark mornings before sunrise when he walked to school that was 12 kilometres away.

His village in Uttar Pradesh had no school. And he had no watch. But he could tell time by looking at where the moon was in the sky. He left home at 4 am and reached his school at 7 am when classes began.

Dr Misra grew up to become a well-known geologist (who discovered a fossil,



In 1972, with the assistance of his wife Nirmala Mishra, Dr. Shiv Balak Misra founded the Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya in Kunaura, located approximately 40 kilometers away from Uttar Pradesh's capital, Lucknow.

Fractofusus misrai) in Canada. But, memories of his own childhood education refused to leave him. He gave up his job abroad and came back to his village in Uttar Pradesh and set up Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya, at Kunaura village, along with his wife Nirmala Misra.

Making rural children self-reliant is the dream the Misras have. To that purpose they provide quality education in the school that is 51 years old, and now has a skill centre that imparts training to the students through various courses, to prepare them for the job market.

Perhaps, Dr Misra understood more than anyone else that only education could improve the lives of rural Indians.

The year 1967 was a turning point for Dr Misra. It was a milestone that not only marked the zenith of his career as a scien-

tist but also the year when he decided to return to his roots and pursue a dream – to set up a school in his village.

In 1967, after winning a scholarship to Canada's Memorial University of Newfoundland, Dr Misra discovered a fossil at Avalon peninsula which, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is the 'oldest known assemblages of large fossils anywhere in the world'.

But success as a geologist was not enough to keep him in Canada. His childhood memories of daily walking several kilometres to his school kept disturbing him.

And, his yearning to be back home was realised five years later, in 1972, when he and his wife Nirmala, established the Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya in Kunaura, about 40

kilometres from the state capital Lucknow.

“I was compelled to return to India. I realised that my biggest aspiration was to ensure that a good school was accessible to children in my village,” said Dr Misra.

“I believed that education was the key to success. I had an awe for educated people. I could think of no other way to become ‘something’ in life other than by studying,” said Dr. Misra.

The school ran initially in a thatched roof-building. It was a huge drain on their limited resources and Nirmala decided to shoulder the responsibility of running the school which allowed her husband to take up a job to pay the bills.

Today, the school has nearly 1,000 students and it recently celebrated its golden jubilee.

Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya runs classes from pre-primary to 12th grade. The aim of the school is to make rural students self-reliant through quality education, and to run welfare schemes for elderly, women, and children. This includes schemes related to socio-economic welfare and environment awareness.

As part of a novel initiative, Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya has set up a skill centre that imparts training in graphic designing to rural students to prepare them for the future job market.

“After conventional education till class

Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya today runs classes from pre-primary to 12th grade. The aim of the school is to make rural students self-reliant through quality education, and to run welfare schemes for elderly, women, and children.

twelfth, students wander aimlessly in cities for jobs. We have set up a skill centre and initiated new courses so that they learn skills in different areas such as housekeeping, photography, mobile and computer repairing and so on,” explained

Dr Misra. He was convinced that this is how rural students will develop confidence and compete with their urban counterparts.

Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya started long-distance online classes in 2019, before COVID 19 pandemic.

“The internet has reached villages. Rural kids want to learn new things, and there are teachers in urban areas who want to teach them. We are trying to make that connection through the Internet and virtual classrooms,” said Dr Misra’s son and founder of Gaon Connection, Neelesh Misra. ■

STORY 2

When conversation with a cab driver led to a school being set up in Turtuk village, Ladakh

A holiday in Ladakh catalysed Sarah Shan of Bengaluru to pack her bags and move to the remote Turtuk village where she has set up a school.



PHOTOS: SARAH SHAH

MUDASSIR KULOO

IT WAS ONLY in 2015, that 25-year-old Sarah Shah learnt about the village Turtuk. The village, with a population of 3,500 people, lies in the Nubra tehsil of Leh district, in mountainous Ladakh. The village is around 2.5 kilometres (kms) from the Line of Control and the Shyok River flows close by.

While on a holiday in Ladakh, Shah heard from her cab driver how this village remained cut off from the rest of the world for weeks on end, and the children living there had no access to quality education.

“By the time I returned home to Bengaluru from that trip, I had decided I wanted to be a teacher in that village,” she said.

In January 2016, after many conversations with a member of the Turtuk village education committee, Shah travelled more than 3,000 kilometres away from her home in Bengaluru to Turtuk to take part in a winter



Turtuk is one of the northernmost villages in India, located in the Leh district of the Nubra Valley. It is situated approximately 2.5 kilometers from the LOC.

tuition programme run by the panchayat for schools in the vicinity.

To prepare herself for the task of setting up a school, Shah volunteered as a teacher in government and public schools in Turtuk, Zaskar and Kargil in Ladakh, as well as in the Kashmir valley, from 2016 to 2019.

In 2020, with the support of Jitendra Mandlecha of Academy of Fine Arts And Crafts Trust (AFAC Mumbai), and a few women teachers in Turtuk, she founded the Turtuk Valley School.

The school started with 25 kids and has now 140 students up to 7th standard.

“There are 12 local teachers and we often have teachers from different parts of India who come here to volunteer,” she said. Shah runs a project called “Teach For Ladakh” through which these volunteers teach in the remote schools.

Her journey from 2015 till date has been exciting from the word go. “I had to drive through Khardung La, the highest motorable pass in the world, descend into the

Nubra valley, and then drive some more to Turtuk. There was heavy snowfall and the temperature was minus 15 degrees Celsius,” she recalled.

But the hospitality of the village inhabitants kept her warm and happy, she said. It made up for all the discomforts of frequent power cuts, lack of medical facilities, inhospitable terrain and of course the inability to get on video call with family and friends back home.

“I stayed at Ismail Bhai’s home whose family took care of me like their own. It was not possible to stay in Turtuk without their support,” she said.

In 2019, she also married a Turtuk inhabitant, Abdul Khaliq. “My husband is a resource person in one of the government departments and has been providing me with all possible support. I go to Bengaluru usually during winters and stay with my parents for some time,” she said.

In the winter of 2022, she and two other teachers from Turtuk took 12 students to Mumbai. “Through the AFAC Trust, 12 students below 13-years of age, and three teachers including me, went to Mumbai. The students and teachers got a taste of what schools in big cities are like and how they function,” said Shah. The students could also learn and explore the various career options they had.

“The children in Turtuk, like anywhere else, have big dreams. The only difference is



Sarah Shah receives a philanthropy award from The Education World Magazine for Turtuk Valley School, ranked 7th in India and 1st in Ladakh.

that they lack exposure. We want them to explore career options and realise that besides becoming doctors and engineers and joining the armed forces, there is a whole other world of opportunities out there,” said Shah.

“We plan to give them aptitude tests that will help them gauge their own strengths and challenges and then choose a career path. To me, that is the most effective way of motivating them, rather than pushing into doing something they don’t enjoy,” she added. □

STORY 3

“I learnt to read and write at the age of fifteen. And I am a teacher today.”

Ayodhya Kumari Gaur, who is 80 years old, learnt to read and write only when she was 15. She completed her B.Ed when she was 47 years old, and now runs her own school in Jodhpur, Rajasthan.



GAON CONNECTION

AYODHYA KUMARI GAUR'S energy is infectious. The 80-year-old runs the Maharishi Public School in Jodhpur, which she began in 2001. “It is Hindi medium, but we also teach English and Urdu. I realise the importance

of knowing English,” she said.

It is difficult to imagine that Ayodhya Gaur remained unlettered for the first 15 years of her life. Coming from a conservative family in Jaipur, going to school for her was never an option. So she could neither read, nor write till she met the wife of her

father's friend. That lady ran a school and she urged Ayodhya Gaur to study as well.

"In 1957, I began to study with children half my age. I mastered the Hindi alphabet, numbers, even some basics of science, but struggled with English," she recalled.

All too soon, her tryst with schooling ended in 1962 when she was married and had to move to Jodhpur.

"I became a wife and then a mother of two and of course, studying was out of question, but the fire remained. A full 15 years later, I managed to privately pass the class 10 exams, when I was 31 years old," said Gaur.

In fits and starts she then completed her intermediate and then her Bachelors in 1985 or so. Finally, in 1990, she did B.Ed from Kota Open University. "My daughter was also doing her B Ed at the same time, elsewhere," she laughed.

In 2001, when she was in her mid 50s, she started the Maharishi Public School in Jodhpur, which was an extension of her home.

"I have seen the problems children face in getting an education. Some cannot afford the fees. Money always comes in the way of a good education, but I ensure it is not the case in my school," she said.

For this 80-year-old, there are some non-negotiable foundations every teacher ought to have. "Age has nothing to do with it. It is

"In 1957, I began to study with children half my age. I mastered the Hindi alphabet, numbers, even some basics of science, but struggled with English"

AYODHYA KUMARI GAUR
MAHARISHI PUBLIC SCHOOL, JODHPUR

all about understanding each other. I am an example of someone who learnt to read at fifteen. I am a teacher today. If a teacher and student understand each other there is no stopping progress," she said.

It has been a long journey, full of speed breakers and detours, but also full of learning and joy, said Ayodhya Gaur. She failed exams several times and had to reappear, she missed classes, was forced to take long breaks, but she never gave up.

Even at 80, she continues to teach. "It is learning and imparting knowledge that has allowed me to remain fit. As long as I am teaching, I can live to be a hundred," she smiled. ■

STORY 4

“It is nothing extraordinary that I’ve done. Every teacher should be able to do this.”

Subhash Yadav transformed two schools in remote villages of Dhar district, Madhya Pradesh. They went from being derelict and non-functional to becoming highly respected and sought after educational institutions.

SATISH MALVIYA

DHAR, MADHYA PRADESH

SUBHASH YADAV TEACHES at Kagdipura village school in Dhar district, Madhya Pradesh. He has been a teacher for 25 years and says that was his childhood dream.

“When I went out with my father, who was a teacher, I saw how respectfully and with so much love people of the village spoke to him. I decided then that I would grow up and become a teacher myself,” said Yadav.

He had a dream but the years ahead were tough. He lost his beloved father when he was only nine years old and the responsibility of caring for his paralysed mother fell on his young shoulders.

Yadav worked as a daily wage labourer in order to continue studying. In 1987, he was selected into the Border Security Force. But, the call of teaching was so strong that



he quit after the initial training there, and completed his BA.

In July 1990 he joined as an assistant teacher at the government primary school in Aali village, in Dhar district, Madhya Pradesh. In 1993, he did his Masters in Hindi.

He recalled the terrible state of the village school. “Not a single child had passed the class five exams. While there were 65 children registered with the school, only 15 came to class regularly. Even teachers were irregular,” he said.

The structure of the school was abysmal too. The walls dripped damp, the ceilings were damaged and the floors broken. “I was horrified. No wonder parents did not want to send their children here,” narrated Yadav.

He took up matters with the district education department and slowly, changes began to take place. He made classrooms more attractive for the students.

“I created learning corners, each one for a different subject. For example, the geography corner had maps and globes and the planets, while the science corner had images and objects related to science,” he explained. The impenetrable darkness of the classrooms, both literally and figuratively, began to be dispelled.

The word about the changes spread in the village and parents began to send their children to school more regularly. “Not just our village, even children from nearby villages sought admission to our school, and the strength went up to 350 students, and I ensured that 54 children from our school got admission into Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya,” Yadav said with pride.

In 2012, Yadav was transferred to a school in the tribal dominated Kagdipura village, in Dhar district. It was like a replay of what he had experienced in his first school.

There was just one classroom at the school where all 79 children sat together, and not much learning or teaching happened in that room, he said. But, not the one to give up,

Yadav rolled up his sleeves and set to work.

Along with senior teachers and officials, he cleaned up the premises and extended the school building. “I brought into play all the experience I had had at Aali and made the classrooms as attractive and inviting as possible both for the students and the teachers,” Yadav said, and it took him five years to do that.

“I was determined to bring in more students to school and encourage the dropouts to rejoin,” he said. He visited the homes of the villagers, spoke to the parents of prospective students and persuaded them of the importance of sending their children to school.

“We invited them to visit our school and see for themselves how we taught their children and what facilities we were providing them,” Yadav recalled.

The school now has gardens and playgrounds and smart classes where teaching and learning have become more attractive. There are more than 350 children and eight classrooms now, a far cry from the 79 students huddled inside a single classroom in 2012, he said with pride.

On September 5, 2017, Subhash Yadav was awarded the presidential award for his outstanding contribution to education. But, the headmaster wears the honour lightly. “It is nothing extraordinary that I have done here. Every educator should be able to do this.” ■

STORY 5

“What have I achieved” – a rural primary school teacher often asks herself

It hasn't been easy for Sadhna Pandey, with a daily three-hour commute to the village school where there is high absenteeism and dismal infrastructure. But there is something there that keeps her going.



AISHWARYA TRIPATHI

URDICHAK (GORAKHPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

DRAPED IN A saree that is securely pinned, Sadhna Pandey leaves her home in Gorakhpur city at 7:40 in the morning to travel 35 kilometres to Urdichak Primary School where she is principal.

The school van drops her and other

teachers half a kilometre away from the government school in Bharohiya block of Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, from where they walk the remaining distance, in monsoons, winters or scorching summer.

But Pandey said this is nothing. In 2013, when she was made principal at Udrichak Urdichak, it was a wrench to leave her four-month-old daughter back home with her mother-in-law. She left home at 6 am those

days and took public transport.

“Sometimes I stood in the heat waiting for more than an hour for a bus, then had to make that long journey and finally walk for 40 minutes to reach school. The stitches I had post my caesarean still hurt,” she recalled.

There were days, she said, when she wondered why she was doing this. She missed her baby daughter who in turn would cling to her when she returned home, fearing she would go away again. “Was it worth it, I often asked myself, but then, when I thought of the children at the school, I could not in good faith abandon them,” said Pandey.

She also had the challenge of getting more children to come to school regularly. She thought up ways and means to do this.

“I got the students to do Faruwahi – the regional dance form – and surprisingly that led to an increase in attendance, as did choir singing! I encouraged sports, and announced a monthly prize for full attendance. The first half of Saturdays were designated as gardening time,” explained Pandey. If any child absented himself or herself for more than three days, she called up their guardians to find out why.

Primary School Urdichak has 102 students out of which 80 per cent are regular. The village predominantly comprises members of the Scheduled Caste and Other backward Caste (OBC).

Pandey takes great pride in the achieve-



Sadhna Pandey leaves her house in Gorakhpur city at 7:40 in the morning to reach Urdichak Primary School – 35 kilometres from her home.

ments of her students. “One student knows up to 30 times tables; four others know the names of all the districts of Uttar Pradesh, and then there are many students who can reel off the capitals of all the states in the country,” she said.

Her students have great affection for her. “During the lockdown, a group of girls from the village came and gave me a pen and a wall hanging on Teacher’s Day,” she said. Pandey is trying to get desks and benches for the school students. “We sit on chairs and they sit on the durrie. Won’t they be cold,” she worried.

For Pandey, all the hard work is worth it she said when she enters school and is greeted by the children. “It takes my mind off my personal tensions,” she said. Adjusting the pleats of her saree, she said, “I avoid wearing saree because it takes time, but the children at school say I look nice in a saree.” The principal smiled shyly as she looked towards the students playing in the school premises. □

STORY 6

The evergreen 'Bana Sir' of Kendrapara

Age is no deterrent to Banabihari Das, the 84-year-old teacher in Odisha, who continues to teach at the same village school after he retired in 1999, and free of cost. He plans to teach till he turns 100, he says.



PHOTOS: ASHIS SENAPATI

ASHIS SENAPATI

BANABIHARI DAS RETIRED in 1999, and is 84 years old. But, he continues to teach in the same school at Kakharuni in Kendrapara district, Odisha, where he has taught since 1964.

The Kakharuni Upgraded Government Upper Primary School, in Pattamundai block is where Bana Sir, as he is fondly known, teaches and lives with his three sons and a daughter. There are 338 students from

classes one to eight in this school.

“My students are wonderful and I am lucky to teach them,” the veteran teacher said, adding he had no plans of retiring, at least not before he turned 100!

“Many current teachers of the school were once Bana Sir’s pupils,” said Renuka Mohapatra, the head mistress.

And, they all say his way of teaching has not changed one bit. Ashok Kumar Parida,

a former student of Bana Sir, now teaches at the school. “He is a legend and has taught hundreds of students in his career spanning 60 years,” said Parida.

“In his dhoti and shirt, he is a picture of enthusiasm as he starts teaching Odia literature, English or Mathematics, even today,” he added.

Suryamani Das is also a former student of Bana Sir. “I studied in this school in the 1960s, my son Ajaya studied here in the 1990s, and now, my grandson Amitav is also a student of Bana Sir,” said Suryamani.

Krushna Chandra Pradhan, a retired professor of Sambalpur University, now settled in Kakharuni village, said Bana Sir had taught him and was an inspiration to so many others like him. “I wish him a long and happy life. He deserves to be immortalised for setting such a positive example to others by providing education to many children of our village and its nearby areas,” said Pradhan.

After retirement Bana decided to continue teaching. It was his love and he had the energy and the desire in him to do it. And he teaches with all that love, energy and passion, all free of cost.

“It’s people like Bana Sir who show us the way. I am sure there are many more Bana Sirs in the country who serve the people, yet remain unseen and unheard,” Ramesh Mallick, the sarapanch of Kakharuni Gram Panchayat, declared.



Banabihari Das, aged 84, has taught three generations of people in Kakharuni Upgraded Government Upper Primary School.

Suprava Nayak, a teacher at the school and a former student of Bana Sir described his teacher as ‘unstoppable’. “He still connects effortlessly with the pupils, engages them and challenges them. A wrong answer still elicits a stern rebuke,” Nayak laughed.

Ranjit Das, who is a physics lecturer at Kendrapara Autonomous College, said his father (Bana Sir) thought providing education to the children of the village was his calling. “He will do that till he draws his last breath.” □

STORY 7

She moved from Mumbai to a village in Kargil to follow her calling – Teaching

Rana Jyoti teaches rural children in the remote Yourbaltak village in Ladakh. She has also spent two years teaching village kids in Himachal Pradesh.



PHOTOS: RANA JYOTI

LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

WHEN RANA JYOTI'S young students share their dreams of becoming doctors, nurses, and pilots, it reaffirms her decision to move to Yourbaltak, a village in Kargil in the Union Territory of Ladakh.

Jyoti, who is 27 years old, teaches English and Hindi to students from classes LKG to eight at Government Model Middle School in Yourbaltak. She travels daily from Balti Bazaar in Kargil city by a bus to reach the village school.

A PR (public relations) professional from

Bihar who moved to Mumbai, Maharashtra to work, she decided she needed something more to do with her life. That brought her to Kargil, over 2,300 kilometres away, in May 2023.

“While working in Mumbai, I happened to hear about Yourbaltak village in Kargil and how children there struggled to access education and many of them did not attend any school. I decided to visit the village and see it for myself,” said Jyoti.

Yourbaltak village has a population of 2,177, and the Government Model Middle School there was built in 1965. “In Kargil, the majority of the families are Muslim. I was curious to understand if the education of girls was a priority there. So I decided to teach in Yourbaltak which at that high altitude is challenging,” she said.

The Government Model Middle School at Yourbaltak has seven classrooms and one hall for accommodating 70 children. Because of the cold weather the school is closed between December and February.

Continuing with her work-from-home job as a PR professional in a private company and simultaneously teaching is an uphill task.

“Most of the time I teach in the early hours and during lunch break I make a quick stop at my ‘PR work office,’” she said.

This isn’t the first time that Jyoti has taken the road less travelled. In 2020, during the pandemic, Jyoti decided to move to

The Government Model Middle School at Yourbaltak has seven classrooms and one hall for accommodating 70 children. Because of the cold weather the school is closed between December and February.

Himachal Pradesh to teach children in the hill villages. In Bir village, a tourist destination in Kangra district, she met some kids and realised that the pandemic had hampered their studies and they were lagging behind.

“I moved from Mumbai to Bir during the pandemic. Schools were shut. And I would gather students in the balcony of people’s homes and teach them. I also worked remotely and mentored them,” she recalled.

The memories of Himachal Pradesh stayed on with Jyoti and she made the big decision. “I switched to a work-from-home job, moved to Kargil and it is one of the most satisfactory things that I have ever done,” she smiled.

During vacations, Jyoti organises communication skills workshops for the children. “I hold this ten-day workshop. The venue for the workshop is our school, and chil-

dren from other schools are also invited to participate in the workshop,” she said.

She teaches students the importance of personality development, time management, problem solving abilities, and teamwork. She tells them about mental health, and has art workshops.

“Our students take part in audio-visual poetry sessions, watch educational videos, participate in quizzes and enjoy story telling sessions,” she explained. She believes that these activities will improve their listening and language skills and therefore inspire curiosity. “It also keeps them tied to their own traditions and culture,” she added.

With the help of RZamba, a Kargil-based charitable trust, Jyoti is able to procure English and Hindi story books for the Model Middle School. RZamba was co-founded by five friends, who wanted to bring about a change in the state of education, health, and waste management in Kargil.

There are everyday struggles, Jyoti admits. “There is no proper seating arrangement for the students, no desks and chairs and students sit on carpets and mats while attending their classes. There is water scarcity in the region and hence there is often no proper drinking water, the washrooms have no taps and the washroom doesn’t even have a proper commode. The doors have no latch,” she said.

Yet, Jyoti said she felt fulfilled. “I have



It is Jyoti’s passion and her desire to change the lives of children in remote parts of the country that brought her to Kargil.

learnt to express myself even better, to communicate through non verbal means. I have learnt to manage and be happy with less,” she said.

“I cook my meals, do my dishes, and hand wash my clothes. I feel like a 10-year-old every day. This has made me a better manager, a better leader,” said Jyoti.

“I have started to value different points of view. I have been able to find purpose and would have felt incomplete if I wasn’t doing what I do. Now I feel that I am living up to my worth,” she added. □

STORY 8

'Music gave me a reason to live and now I share that joy with others'

Kamini Mishra, a 62-year-old music teacher, earned her Masters in music when she was 53, and is today a sought after music teacher in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.



DIVENDRA SINGH

LUCKNOW, UTTAR PRADESH

STRAINS OF MUSIC emerge from the home of Kamini Mishra, a 62-year-old music teacher living in Viram Khand, Lucknow, in Uttar Pradesh. Her small home of no more than two rooms reverberates with the voices of children and women

practising their vocal chords. At night, she takes a long distance online music class with a student in the United States of America.

The remarkable thing about this music teacher is that she began to formally learn music when she turned 51. She enrolled herself into a music college and graduated with a masters degree at the age of 53.

“I was in my twelfth class when my mother passed away. Once my older brother and sister got married, the responsibility of looking after my younger siblings fell on me and I was forced to grow up at the age of 17 or 18,” Mishra recalled. She said music was dear to her mother’s family and that is where she got her love for it.

“My father disapproved of girls singing. It was not considered a ‘proper’ thing to do in my house,” she said. But, that did not stop her from performing on stage at school. But with her mother’s demise, everything came to a halt.

Married in 1985 into a joint family that had absolutely no interest in music truly closed the door of singing for Mishra. “I spent all my time looking after the household,” she said.

In 2007, Mishra’s husband passed away. “I was only 48 years old. My father took me back home and there my tryst with music began once more,” she said.

When she met her guru, Saroj Pandey, the latter told Mishra that she should take up singing again. A young friend Shikha encouraged her to get admission into the Bhatkhande Music Institute in Lucknow. “She helped me prepare for the entrance exam and I got the admission! Sadly, Shikha lost her life in an accident and I felt so alone, once again,” said Mishra.

“My classmates were no more than 18-20 years old and it was difficult to match their enthusiasm and energy, but

“My classmates were no more than 18-20 years old and it was difficult to match their enthusiasm and energy, but I managed”

KAMINI MISHRA
MUSIC TEACHER

I managed,” she laughed.

After she passed out from Bhatkande, Kamini auditioned for the radio and gave several performances there, besides other music platforms. But her first love was teaching music to others.

Her Guru Ma encouraged her in this. She began with a child in the neighbourhood and has not looked back since. “A lot of ladies who are in my age group also learn from me. They like to learn bhajans, lokgeet and ghazals,” said Mishra.

Thanks to Kamini’s efforts nearly 30 of her students have enrolled into studying for a music degree in college.

“I love how friendly Ma’am is and her way of teaching is so nice,” said Manaswi, a class five student who learns from her.

Mishra gives music the credit for bringing her so far ahead in life. “But for music I would have been nothing but a broken soul,” she said. ■

STORY 9

Friendship goals in a rural school in Cuttack, Odisha

A government high school in Tigiria, Odisha, is run by three childhood friends who work there as a principal and teachers. The school is the lifeline of several nearby villages for the past six decades.

PRACHI RATHI
CUTTACK, ODISHA

FRIENDSHIP CAN MOVE mountains and the Arjun Subudhi High School in Tigiria block of Cuttack, Odisha is a classic example of it. The government school is run by three childhood friends Sushant Kumar Sahu, Kailash Behera, and the principal of the school (who wishes to remain anonymous).

The three friends belong to Tigria. The school they work in now was established in 1962. But the three friends have taken it to greater heights and made it a centre of excellence.

“The school was started by the government some six decades ago. We decided to work here and teach the village children to break the stereotype that people have towards villagers as being only labourers or poor farmers,” said Sahu, who teaches science at the Arjun Subudhi High School.

The school has 350 students from class



These three college friends decided to work together at the school as they realised the significance of their united purpose.

6 to 10. The three college friends decided to work together at the school as they realised the significance of their united purpose. Whereas the principal oversees the entire operations of the school, Sahu, who is a Science teacher, diligently supports the student’s learning journey. Kailash is a member of the multi-tasking staff to ensure the smooth functioning of the school.

Apart from teaching the regular subjects, the three friends want to give their students

leadership skills.

In order to do that they have a 'School Cabinet', which prepares students to take on responsibilities and become leaders. Just as the government has a cabinet, students are members of the school cabinet.

"Students learn essential lessons about leadership and governance when they get specific 'ministries' as cabinet members," explained Sahu.

Meetings are conducted by a student 'Chief Minister' and other student cabinet ministers. They discuss various agendas, challenges, and solutions for better running of the school. This hands-on approach enables children to comprehend the inner workings of democracy as well as the significance of their future duties as responsible citizens.

The novel initiatives made by the three friends have also positively impacted teaching practices. Previously, teachers were swamped by administrative work. But now they work together and discuss creative ideas. They organise learning circles and create a rich learning environment.

"One significant factor that has contributed to the success of the school is the integration of audio-visual learning methods by the teachers and the government. By leveraging technology and incorporating multimedia elements, we have witnessed a remarkable boost in students' engagement and enthusiasm for learning," said

Chakradhar Behra, Block Education Officer, Nuapatna village, Tigiria Block, Cuttack.

According to the official, the high school has been chosen for the best category award in Tigiria block by the Education Department of Government of Odisha.

In 2019-2020, two students, Anshuman Sahu and Shradhanjali, ranked first in Cuttack district in the matriculation exams.

Anshuman Jena, the school's history teacher, said the past two years were most rewarding, as students were performing both in academics as well as in sports. Recently, ten students were selected to represent the school at the district-level kabaddi and volleyball matches.

Through the joint efforts of the School Management Committee and alumni, plans are underway to build a hockey field for the students. They want to represent the national team in the Football World Cup in the upcoming years. They were motivated by the Odisha Hockey Men's World Cup, 2023.

"Confidence is the asset that my school has given me," said Gopal, a determined ninth-grade student of the school. He had enrolled in this high school with the dream of becoming a mathematics teacher and a civil servant. "The school has helped me improve my English language skills through educational videos and mentorship. I feel confident and I now actively participate in class presentations," he added. ■

STORY 10

A teacher in a Naxalite-affected area transforms the village school, wins community's trust

Premveer Singh practically begged the inhabitants of Rajgarh Block in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, to send their children to the government school in Khoradinh village. He built bridges of trust with the parents and admissions to the school went up.

BRIJENDRA DUBEY

KHORADINH (MIRZAPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

IN 2015, WHEN Premveer Singh was posted as a primary school teacher to Khoradinh in Rajgarh Block, Mirzapur district, his near and dear ones discouraged him from reporting for duty there. The school lay untended and neglected in a village that was known for Naxalite activities.

"I could immediately tell the school was struggling to survive. In all, there were perhaps 200 students enrolled in the school, most of whom never bothered to show up," recalled Premveer Singh.

It was an uphill task to get children back into the classrooms. "We went from door to door, practically begging the parents to enrol their wards. Gradually, the admissions began to go up," he said.

Today the school is a Composite School



Composite school in Khoradinh, Mirzapur is a far cry from its pitiable state when Premveer Singh had first laid eyes on it. BRIJENDRA DUBEY

with classes from one to eight. It is a far cry from what it was when Premveer Singh first laid eyes on it. The school has 315 children enrolled and 25 per cent of them are from tribal communities.

Working with the community closely was the key factor in building bridges of trust. "Now, we have a parent-teacher meeting on the first Wednesday of every month, and

this has kept the parents invested in the school and the education of the children. We discuss problems the children may have in school and find solutions to those,” said the teacher.

Parents were initially reluctant about sending their children to school fearing Naxalite activities in the village. In the early 2000s the mood was volatile and trouble erupted frequently.

An attack in 2001 sent shock waves across the village, when about 40-50 Naxalites launched an attack on a police camp in the village. They made away with rifles, guns, rounds of bullets, and three police personnel were injured.

Poverty was another reason for low attendance and enrollment, Premveer pointed out. “Many of the parents are not lettered themselves and are not aware of the importance of a good education. Also, in times of harvests, they need the help of their children in the fields, and therefore do not send them to school,” he added.

But all that is changing. “With the parents being more invested, there is a bond between them and the teachers. We have children of farmers and daily wage labourers studying in our school. And, we want to make sure they have a head start when they go out into the world, and the parents understand that now,” said Premveer.

The district magistrate has acknowledged

the school as being a good educational institution. There are 19 parameters that define a good school and this one fulfils all of them. This includes clean drinking water, toilets, digital classrooms, a dining hall and a playground.

“The physical appearance of the school has changed drastically from what it was in 2015,” said Ashok Patel, a teacher at the school, who joined a few months after Premveer Singh. “Now there is Kota stone flooring, manicured gardens, playgrounds, benches, etc., that have transformed the school,” he said.

“People think there is no proper learning imparted at a government school, or that there are no facilities for their children. But our school has flown against the face of all those assumptions,” he said proudly.

The school has taken the parents of the students into its confidence, assured them of the best possible education for their children and has kept them in the loop about what is happening in school.

The teachers at the school coach students to get admission into the Navodaya Vidyalaya. “In the first year I coached five students to take part in a block level science competition and one of them came first. The same child is today preparing for the NEET exam. When they do well, it is the best kind of guru dakshina for us,” said Premveer. □

STORY 11

The 'Seasonal Teachers' of Kashmir

Educational volunteers trek for miles braving snow and wild animals to teach children of the nomadic Gujjar and Bakarwal communities to keep J&K's 'seasonal centres' of education going.



PHOTOS: MUDASSIR KULOO

MUDASSIR KULOO AND RAOUF DAR

IT TAKES SHAHEENA Akhtar more than one-and-a-half hours to reach the upper reaches of Chittergul Shangus in Anantnag district, South Kashmir. Whether it is rain, snow or sunshine, the 22-year-old leaves home at 8:30 in the morning, because she knows a bunch of kids from the Gujjar and Bakarwal nomadic communities wait for her to turn up.

Akhtar is a 'seasonal' teacher. She began teaching when she was only 16 years old in special 'Seasonal Centres', which have been set up for the nomadic population of Jammu & Kashmir, as they migrate, along with their cattle, from one place to another in search of green pastures.

Akhtar is a Seasonal Educational Volunteer and her engagement is 'purely temporary'. According to an official of the J&K educa-



Mubarak Hussain Bajard from Chaklipora Shangus in Anantnag district takes two hours sometimes to cover seven kilometres to reach his students – his motivation to do so.

tion department, over 33,000 children from nomadic communities enrol into these schools. Every year, around 1,500 teachers are engaged as seasonal teachers for a period of six months to teach them.

“These schools are a top priority of the government since the children of these nomadic communities have few avenues available to them. The government wants to ensure that all required facilities are put in place for them,” said Rajeev Rai Bhatnagar, advisor to the Lieutenant Governor in J&K.

“Between the months of April and September, I am paid Rs 10,000 a month to teach these children. The rest of the year, I teach them for free,” said Akhtar.

The government of Jammu and Kashmir, with support of the central government, began seasonal centres for children of the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities in

2003, and provided the schools with tents, school supplies and educational volunteers like Akhtar.

These nomadic groups, which form 11.9 per cent of the union territory’s total population, camp with their families in the highland pastures during summers along with their sheep and goats. They live in tents and kothas there and return to their homes during the winter months.

Mubarak Hussain Bajard from Chaklipora Shangus in Anantnag district is an educational volunteer. “It takes me two hours sometimes to cover seven kilometres but my love for these children motivates me to do that,” said the 29-year-old volunteer.

Bajard himself has not studied beyond class 12. And, sometimes he has to hire himself out as a labourer in order to make ends meet. “I am well aware of the difficulties these nomadic people face. I can earn

better, perhaps doing some other work, but I want to educate them,” he said. Bajard, who has been teaching for 10 years, has a wife and three children to feed.

“I work as a seasonal teacher for six months when the nomadic tribes go to higher reaches. I get paid a salary for that. But, when they return to the lower areas in the bitter winters, I teach their children free of cost in their homes. It is very difficult, but we continue to teach them so that their studies are not interrupted,” said Akhtar.

Moomin Ahmad Khan, another volunteer, started teaching students after he completed his 12th. “I could not study further due to financial constraints. But it gives me immense satisfaction to teach these nomadic children who have very little going on for them,” he said.

Khan, who lives in Chaklipora in Anantnag district has taught for five years and daily walks eight kilometres to teach the children. “In winters, I give free tuition to them at their homes,” said the 24-year-old. He has a family of eight to support with the money he earns as a seasonal teacher. He looks after his parents, wife, two children, two sisters and a brother.

“It is really hard to survive on the Rs 60,000 I earn in a year as a seasonal teacher. I have to supplement this income by working as a labourer, especially in the winters,” he added.

Ghulam Mohammad who is from the Bakarwal community moves with his wife

“I could not study further due to financial constraints. But it gives me immense satisfaction to teach these nomadic children who have very little going on for them”

MOOMIN AHMAD KHAN
'SEASONAL' TEACHER

and two children to the upper reaches in April when the snowline recedes and it is less cold. They live up-mountain for six months.

“It is because of the seasonal teachers, that my children, who are in classes four and six, are receiving an education. Otherwise, living so far away on mountains, they would be deprived of any kind of learning,” he said. Many of these seasonal teachers often stayed with them as they could not commute every day.

“My son wants to become a teacher and my daughter an environmentalist. Their dreams are kept alive because of these teachers who walk miles to teach them. And, in the winters, they continue to teach them free of cost,” Mohammed said with gratitude. ■

STORY 12

A school teacher begins his day with taking a dip in spring water, with his students

A tribal village school in Bilhata, deep in the forests of the Panna Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh, is the home and karmbhoomi of Lakshman Singh Rajgond.

ARUN SINGH

BILHATA (PANNA), MADHYA PRADESH

IT WAS IN 2002 that Lakshman Singh Rajgond was posted to the Prathmik Shala (primary school) in Bilahta, a tribal village in Madhya Pradesh, located in the dense forests of the Panna Tiger Reserve. It was more than 250 kilometres away from his home in Shahdol.

The village lies deep in the forests where wild animals roam freely, and Rajgond chose to live there and teach the adivasi children whose parents are unlettered and have never attended school themselves.

Bilhata with about 90 tribal families living in it, is now a transformed village thanks to the efforts of the 50-year-old teacher. There are 49 tribal children enrolled at the village school who now read, write and speak both Hindi and English.

“The adivasi people in the village are peace



PHOTOS: ARUN SINGH

loving, uncorrupted, and a contented lot, despite the lack of facilities and physical comforts,” said Rajgond whose first posting was at Barachh village of Panna before he came to Bilhata that is located about 60 kms away from the district headquarters at Panna.

“For years, I even lived in the school premises. But about three years ago, at night, a tiger made itself comfortable in the school courtyard, after which I preferred to stay in the

village with other villagers,” the teacher said.

There are just two teachers at the Prathmik Shala and both live in the village, Rajgond said. “My fellow teacher, Pratap Kushwaha is from Tara Jharkua village in Panna, and he joined the school just a few years ago,” he said.

The day at the school begins with the students and teachers taking a dip in a small natural spring about a kilometre away, in the midst of the forest. After which the children go home for breakfast while the teachers cook themselves something at the school.

The lessons begin soon after. Nine-year-old Arvind Gond who is in class four, reads out a passage confidently from an English text book and has no trouble spelling the English words or explaining their meanings.

Arvind’s classmates Hargovind Gond and Bharati Gond also read fluently. There was pride in his voice as Rajgond said, “Despite being poor and having no real facilities, the children here are diligent and want to learn. Students in class two of our school can do maths calculations, tell multiplication tables and read Hindi books. The class four and five students read fluently, and are well versed in addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.”

After school hours, both the teachers visit the families of the school children and hold free extra classes for those who need help.

“My student Phool Chand Gond is studying in Maharaja College at Chatrapur. And another student Deepa Gond is a graduate too, and now a social worker,” said the proud teacher.

Deepa Gond is associated with a social organisation in Project Koshika that works with 10 villages in this forest area in reducing maternal and infant mortality rates. According to Deepa, things have improved greatly in the areas of health and nutrition.

“Compared to earlier days, women are more aware now about health and nutrition issues and many of them are planting vegetable gardens around their own homes and in vacant spaces. The vegetables that they grow has led to an improvement in their health and the health of their children,” she said.

“It is because I am educated that I can do something for my village. If Lakshman Sir or Pratap Sir were not there to teach us at school, we would have remained in the dark, uneducated and ignorant,” Deepa said with emotion.

“Bilahata is a perfect example of co-existence, where humans and wild animals live and let live. They even share the same water source for drinking water,” said Rajgond. ■

STORY 13

A Sanskrit teacher at a village school helps children from Sindh feel at home

A teacher from Jodhpur, Rajasthan builds bridges for children who have migrated from Sindh in Pakistan, so that they can integrate smoothly into their new home.



PHOTOS: ASHA BAI

LARAIB FATIMA WARSII

ASHA DAI IS writing short skits for her students. It is a task to which she pays a lot of attention as the skit is going to be performed by children who have migrated here from Sindh, and are now students of the Senior Secondary School Madhya Poorv, in Gangana village in Luni block, Jodhpur district.

Though the 43-year-old teaches Sanskrit to

students of classes 6-12, she does a lot more.

There are approximately 1,500 students in the school, many of whom are children of migrants from Sanghar in Sindh Province in Pakistan.

“I still remember getting on the train in Mirpur Khas railway station in Sindh. It was the month of December in 2013. It took us two days to reach Barmer,” recalled Manjhi Bheel, a 17 year old boy, who now lives in Gangana

village, and is a student of class 10.

“Asha Ma’am conducted extra classes for us after school so that we could start communicating better. She made sure we learnt at our own pace and learnt Hindi through the skits and conversations,” Manjhi added.

The migrant children knew little when they first joined the school. They only spoke Sindhi. “They did not even know things our nursery children would know. I decided to make them comfortable first in the language before getting down to teaching them other things,” said Dai.

So she began to write short skits in simple Hindi that the children could manage. “This would help them learn the language and bring them out of their shells, I thought,” she said.

The transition from Sindh to Jodhpur was a difficult one for most of the children. “They were bullied as they came from Pakistan. Children can be cruel and the local students would make fun of them and their accents and often tell them to go back from where they came,” the teacher said.

Dai knew these were hurtful to the migrant children but she had to tread carefully so as not to antagonise anyone. So, she set about creating mixed study groups, organising competitions and putting up plays where the children all participated together and got to know one another.

The teacher visited the homes of the



There are approximately 1500 students in the school, many of whom are children of migrants from Sanghar in Sindh Province in Pakistan.

children who had come from across the border, met the parents and convinced them to send their children to school. “I had to do this as many of them were not ready to send their children to school, especially their daughters,” she said.

“I had to fight to join the school. I want to be a barrister but my father believes education for me is a waste as I will have to get married eventually,” Anita Vai, a class nine student said. Her father was a labourer back in Sindh and now works as a farmer in Gangana village. Her favourite subject is Sanskrit, but she wonders if she will be able to study and realise her dream. But for now, she loves coming to school.

“Asha Ma’am helped me tackle my problem, which was my inability to communicate in Hindi. I could neither talk to the teachers nor my classmates because I did not know a word. But she was there for me every step of the way,” said Anita. □

STORY 14

Growing their own food at school

The students of a government middle school, in Kohima, Nagaland, grow their own vegetables for mid-day meals; make pickles and products out of waste, all with the help of their teacher



PHOTOS: SAYANTANI DEB

SAYANTANI DEB

IN MARCH 2010, when Mimi Yhoshii took charge as the head teacher of Government Middle School Officers Hill district, Kohima in Nagaland, she wanted every student under her care to have a holistic education.

Most of the children who came to school

were from families that were unable to provide them with adequate nutrition required for a healthy life. So, she started a kitchen garden in the school premises.

For the past four years, the students have been growing and eating seasonal vegetables as part of their mid-day meals. They grow cabbage, pumpkin, squash, chillies, bottle gourd, tomato, beans, maize and



Agriculture is the backbone of India's economy and every child should understand the importance of it, said Mimi Yhoshii.

several other vegetables.

“A child needs healthy and nutritious food in order to grow up healthy,” the 51-year-old Yhoshii said.

“Agriculture is the backbone of India's economy, every child should understand the importance of farmers and farming. I am trying to instil in them the ability to grow food so that they can earn their living from a young age instead of waiting around for government jobs,” said the teacher, who has been honoured with the National Teacher Award-2022.

“The kitchen garden is an out-of-the-box initiative, it has brought the teachers and students under a single roof. Every teacher has been assigned a different

responsibility and we work closely with the students to monitor the garden,” said Imtirenla Jamir, a senior teacher of the school.

Fourteen-year-old Suman Gandrama, a class 8 student finds gardening a perfect stress buster. “We prepare the beds, plant seeds, grow vegetables, and even cook and eat together. It is like being on a picnic,” said Gandrama.

“We have all read about organic produce in books, but thanks to our teachers, we now grow them ourselves,” she added.

Besides gardening, the students have vocational courses where they learn how to make pickles, make paper bags out of papers collected from people's homes.



Mimi Yhoshü received the 2022 National Award for Teachers from the President.

They distribute the bags to the shops around their area so that the use of plastic can be lessened.

“I love making pickles and have made garlic, ginger and chilli pickles,” said Vicky Kumar, a class 7 student.

Children eagerly wait for November when their head teacher organises a sale day, “Throughout the year, our children make so many things and on sale day, a few days before Christmas, we display and sell their products. The income generated from the sale day is mostly used to purchase items for school activities,” Yhoshii explained.

The school is earning praises from all quarters. “I have been to GMS Officers’ Hill; the space is very small. But with the available space, Mimi Yhoshii has turned it into an organic kitchen garden for her students’ mid-day meal,” said Avino

Tase, Deputy Director at the Directorate of School Education (Nodal officer/SPOC for National Awards to Teachers - NAT).

“She has taken a commendable initiative, helping students develop skills in gardening, organic farming, and the dignity of labour, in addition to their regular lessons,” Tase added.

“Farming should be in the school curriculum,” said Imsutola Jamir, Dietitian at Christian Institute Of Health Sciences & Research (CIHSR), Chumukedima.

“When the children harvest and grow their vegetables, it also develops an interest in them to respect the food they grow,” she added. □



SECTION 2

STRENGTHENING FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY AND NUMERACY

FLN IS THE TOUCHSTONE OF EDUCATION THAT IS GUIDING TEACHERS
IN THE CLASSROOM AND OUTSIDE OF IT TOO



STORY 15

PHOTOS: PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA

Spreading smiles in the classroom

A primary school teacher in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, does whatever it takes to engage with her students. Nidhi Singh gives out smiley badges to students who perform well, and even awards parents who invest in their child's education.

PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA

BAGAHIBHARI (GORAKHPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

EIGHT-YEAR-OLD Suraj Gaur can barely contain his excitement. His teacher, Nidhi Singh, has just handed him a 'Smiley'. It means he has been the best performing student of the month.

This is just one of the ways Singh holds the attention of her little wards. She has

59 of them and it is her job to ensure they are actually learning something in class.

The 30-year-old is an assistant teacher at the Primary School in Bagahibhari village of Gorakhpur district in Uttar Pradesh. Singh uses various techniques and teaching methods as mentioned in NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) programme launched by the



From holding the hands of her young students in order to make them write to teaching them poems that will help them remember numbers and alphabets, Nidhi Singh does them all.

Union Ministry of Education, in July 2021.

This programme recognises the importance of early learning and makes proficiency in reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level the utmost priority.

“The students in class one have no prior experience of formal learning other than whatever they are taught at the anganwadi centres before coming to school. I divide the children into three groups – A, B, and C – with Group C being those who take just a little longer to learn, and have a shorter attention span,” she explained.

Singh is often seen holding the little hands of her students and helping them form letters. Or, she teaches them poems that will help them recall numbers and alphabets. These are remediation techniques she uses in class to ensure her students all come to the same level of learning.

The remediation techniques are to ensure that her students excel and become ‘NIPUN’ or accomplished. One of the objectives of the flagship programme is to achieve foundational literacy and numeracy skills at primary level by 2026-27.

“In my class, almost all the students attend the remedial classes. I don’t want anyone to feel disheartened for being singled out for remedial classes. So everyone sits in the class, I just keep a closer eye on the students who need that extra push, and they all excel together,” the teacher said.

The wonder of worksheets

While the Smiley badges spread joy, Singh uses worksheets provided by the education department in Uttar Pradesh, to bring her students up to par.

The children work on the worksheets, and

Singh assesses them once a week, on Saturdays, after which she categorises them into fast learners, those who need to work harder, and those who need remedial attention.

She often uses a 'pyramid style' of teaching in which she appoints fast learners in her class to teach the weaker students.

For the first timers in school, Singh uses Bhojpuri as an icebreaker. Most of the children speak that language and are as yet unfamiliar with Hindi. "Just using the word *bhaat* instead of *chawal*, or *kiwaad* instead of *darwaza*, goes a long way in making them feel comfortable," she said.

"It is only after three months that I begin to talk to them in Hindi. It takes them time to switch. They usually learn Maths and English easily but Hindi is a struggle. I often use my mobile as an audio-visual aid phone to 'show and tell'," she smiled.

Awards for parents

There are challenges of course, said Singh. "One of them is attendance. I remember how hard it was convincing Suraj to attend classes regularly. He was a bright child. I taught him for two months, he was learning well, but suddenly, he disappeared for weeks. When he returned, he had forgotten all that he had learnt," she rued.

Now, she has found a way to keep the parents of children invested in school too. Parents of the students are invited



Nidhi Singh, a 30-year-old assistant teacher, leads 59 students at Bagahibhari village's Primary School in Gorakhpur.

to meetings regularly and asked to ensure their wards attend classes regularly. The most aware parents are awarded during the annual functions.

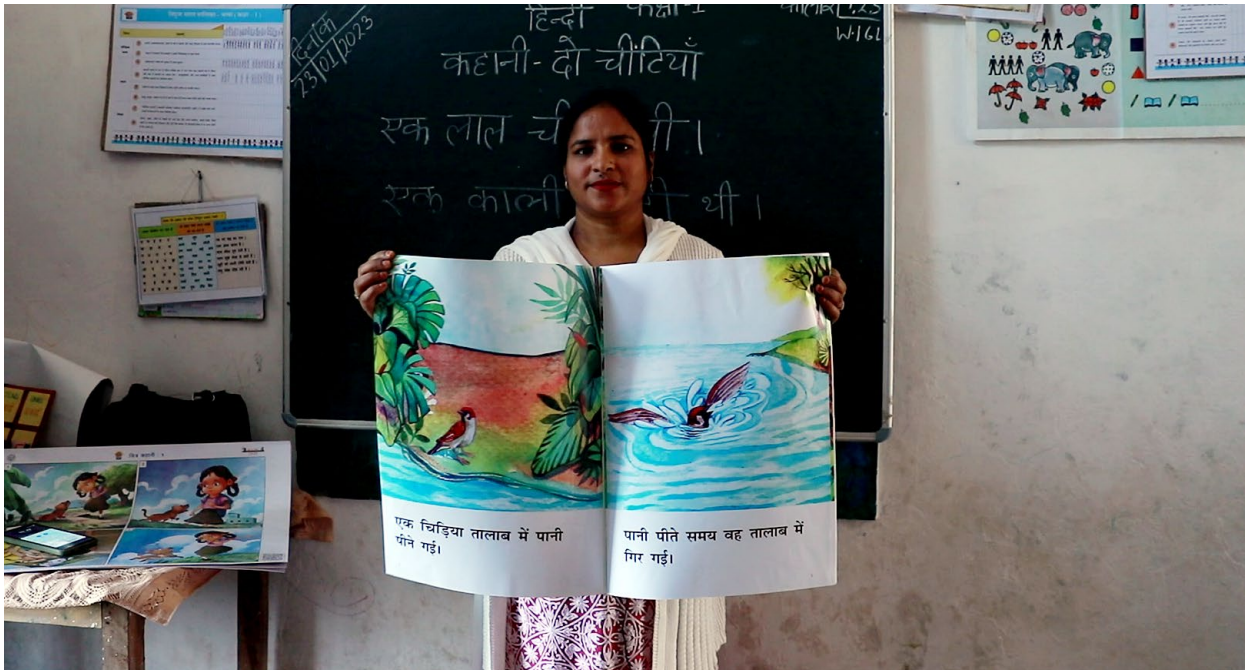
Parents who are in touch with their child's progress, who attend parent-teacher conferences, and want to know about their child's progress are the 'aware' parents, Singh explained.

Sanju Gaur, mother of Suraj, has won that award. "I was awarded as a parent. I felt proud of my son. There was a lot of *bheed* [crowd] in the ceremony and everybody in the village congratulated me. It felt good," she said. □

STORY 16

Here comes the Big Book

Teacher Shazia Bano ensures that every child in her class is competent in literacy and numeracy skills with the help of story books, maths kits, flash cards, and posters.



AISHWARYA TRIPATHI

BHANDARO (GORAKHPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

SHAZIA BANO'S STUDENTS watch wide-eyed as she holds up the 'Big Book' and narrates the story of how a bird outwits a cat. The 36-year-old is a primary school teacher in Bhandaro village, Jungle Kauria block, in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh.

Bano's class of 11 boys and 18 girls is enthralled as the story unfolds, one page

at a time. Every now and then, she stops and asks her audience a question or two, and they respond enthusiastically.

The 'Big Book' was introduced by NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) programme of the government to equip every child in the country with Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) skills by 2026-27.

The glossy Big Book – full of animals and



Bhandaro Primary School is situated 20 kilometers from Gorakhpur city in Uttar Pradesh.

bird stories — is working its magic and grabbing the attention of the children.

Of the 29 students in Shazia’s class, five have attained the set goal under NIPUN. The curriculum is 22 weeks long and was initiated in August 2022.

Apart from the Big Book, a maths kit— which has counting tiles, shapes, a clock to teach time; posters of poems; and language alphabets — have been provided to schools as teaching aids.

These are part of the Teachers’ Learning Material (TLM) provided under NIPUN, and Shazia makes full use of them. “Each school is running at a different pace, to ensure that every child is carried forward under the NIPUN scheme,” she explained.

“A few students are shy and take time to open up but with some love and patience they are able to respond to questions,” the teacher said. “Our children should be able to go to a shop with currency and do the

addition and subtraction, and bring back the correct change,” she added.

The teaching aids Bano uses also bring out the best in children. “Meera did not enjoy writing at all, and she would often absent herself from school. But the six-year-old is articulate orally and the interactive play methods I use in class has got her more interested and engaged in class than she ever was,” said Shazia.

Shazia has students of classes one and two in the same classroom. Then, there are those children who are way below the level they should be on. And, often, she has to start from scratch, before she can move on. This means she has to keep a balance and while she is bringing those children up to scratch, the rest of the class has to be kept engaged.

But, no matter what the struggles and challenges there is an abundance of love in her class. “We love Shazia madam and hate it when she is on leave,” said Ananya, a six-year-old student of Bano ma’am. ■

STORY 17

A village school with a 'Parliament' and Prime Minister

Scarcity has become the mother of innovation for Roshan Jahan, a primary school teacher in rural Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh as she deftly manages a multi-grade, multi-level classroom with limited resources and keeps her students engaged.



PHOTOS: PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA

PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA
TIGHRA DWITYA (GORAKHPUR),
UTTAR PRADESH

THE ONLY SOUND in the classroom is that of paper rustling as the students turn the pages of their workbooks. Heads bent, fingers busy writing, the 55 children in Roshan Jahan’s class are a

study in concentration.

Every now and then the class leader Simran, a nine-year-old student, surveys the classroom and if she finds anyone struggling with the classwork, she goes over to help with the exercises in the workbook.

“The workbooks provided by the education

department are a godsend and in a multi-grade, multi-level classroom like ours, they keep the children gainfully occupied if we are called out of class for some administrative work,” said Jahan.

Jahan has been teaching at the government primary school in Tigra Dwitya village of Gorakhpur district in Uttar Pradesh since 2008. She became a principal in 2014. The primary school has 111 students from classes one to five and only two teachers, Roshan Jahan herself and Ruchi Upadhyay, and two functional classrooms. While Jahan teaches *bhasha* (language) to all the classes, Upadhyay teaches mathematics.

The two teachers have to juggle a lot of work and responsibilities. “Teachers, even if we are just a handful, are often called upon to do outside-the-classroom-work, such as updating digital records, conducting surveys and so on. We are forced to leave the class unattended. In such a situation, class leaders and workbooks step in for us,” Jahan smiled.

The workbooks are part of the study material provided by the state’s education department, as recommended by the NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) programme of the government.

Designating responsibilities to the students is also recommended by the NIPUN scheme. “Delegating responsibility to the students makes them confident, even those who are introverts and shy,”

Jahan pointed out.

She gave the example of Kanak, a class two student, who barely spoke and did not engage with either the teacher or the class at all.

“But I could tell she grasped things quickly. So, I made her a group leader and now it was her responsibility to explain concepts she understood to those who hadn’t,” Jahan said. Kanak positively bloomed after this, the teacher added.

While multi-grade, multi-level classroom teaching is challenging, there are a lot of positive spin offs too, said Jahan.

The children on their part know the drill well. “We have practised this drill several times. We know that when Roshan madam is busy, we have to cooperate with each other. We have our assigned groups in the class and together we get on with our workbooks,” said Simran, a class three student.

“When I explain concepts that Roshan madam has taught us to students who are struggling to understand them, my understanding of the subject gets better,” she said.

An efficient set up

“The students of each grade sit in separate groups in the same classroom. If I am teaching the students of class three, I make sure the students of classes one and two are revising what has already been taught to them,” explained Jahan.



Every month, these ministers hold Baal Sansad, a 'parliamentary' session where they discuss the progress of their ministerial tasks.

She often uses audio-visual content as a teaching aid. While one or two groups of students watch the audio-visuals, she moves on to the other group in the classroom to teach them something else.

“It is sometimes cumbersome to handle so many things at the same time, but now with years of practice, I can say that I am conducting classes in an efficient manner,” Jahan said.

The maths teacher, Upadhyay, also follows suit. “As soon as I know I am required to be out of the classroom, the students know what to do. They immediately take out their workbooks and get cracking,” she said.

Fostering responsibility

To further reinforce responsibility and leadership in the students, Jahan has come up with the idea of creating a parliament in class. “We appoint students as ministers for ministries of library, water, culture, education and health.

There is also a prime minister who oversees all these ministers,” Jahan said.

“This has led to a remarkable rise in the confidence levels of these students. These ministers report to me about issues in their respective portfolios and I then act accordingly. I save valuable time by not having to micromanage these issues in the classroom,” said Jahan.

Ankita Gaur, a student of class three is the minister of health. She ensures the students in the school are well turned out, their nails are cut and their books are well kept.

Every month, these ministers hold a Baal Sansad, a 'parliamentary' session where they discuss the progress of their ministerial tasks. Their performance is reviewed by the teacher.

“I ensure that the portfolios are rotated. New students are given a chance to lead the various ministries,” Jahan concluded. ■

STORY 18

The 'Jadui Pitara' works its magic in the classroom

Under the Central government's NIPUN Bharat initiative, primary school teachers are being trained to adopt a scientific pedagogy and improve a child's ability to read and recognise language alphabets, and solve simple mathematical problems.



AISHWARYA TRIPATHI
BHANDARO (GORAKHPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

SHAZIA BANO WALKS into her classroom with a green briefcase. The box is a *jadui pitara* (magic box) for her first graders who are familiar with what is about to unfold. And their excitement knows no bounds.

The students can't wait for Shazia madam to distribute colourful number tiles, cut out in varied shapes like hexagons and squares, as well as red, green and yellow building blocks.

The 36-year-old is a primary school teacher in Bhandaro village, Jungle Kauria block, in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. She teaches



The green jadui pitara has colourful number tiles, cut out in varied shapes like hexagons and squares, as well as red, green and yellow building blocks.

a class of 11 boys and 18 girls and has to keep them engaged all the time.

Bano divides her class into six groups and distributes the blocks, tiles and shapes to them. "Rotate it amongst the groups after some time," she instructed them.

Meanwhile, 12 kms away from Shazia's Bhandaro Primary School, a training session is underway at the Block Resource Centre for 35 headmasters and *shikshak sankuls*. The *sankuls* are teachers from various schools, chosen by the block level education department, who in addition to their duties in their own schools, also assist teachers of other schools with the

teaching methodology and so on.

One *sankul* is assigned to help 10-15 schools implement Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) in their respective schools. FLN skills test a child's ability to read and recognize language alphabets, and solve simple mathematical problems.

Shazia participated in a four-day training-programme for teachers of Class I, II and III in September 2022. Improving FLN skills of their class was part of the session and Shazia's green briefcase, the *jadui pitara*, is an outcome of that training.

"We are training select teachers so that we

can cover a larger target group. Each headmaster and *sankul* is expected to pass on the key points from the training session to the teachers,” said Amitesh Kumar, Block Education Officer.

The training is being held by the district administration under the NIPUN Bharat initiative by the central government.

A district NIPUN cell has been constituted to assist the government education bodies analyse data, identify insights and define action steps for district and block officials. The district NIPUN Cell is working closely with DIET (District Institute of Education and Training) to facilitate training and address gaps in access to Teaching/Learning Material (TLM). TLM are instructional materials, such as posters, blocks and tiles, that a teacher may use in teaching and learning.

The teachers have been provided with day-wise detailed lesson plans. This lays out what is to be taught on a specific day and prepares the teachers beforehand. Shazia was given hard copies of the lesson plans and trackers which were a great help.

“The lesson plans were really helpful. Prior to this we had to make one on our own, figure out how to divide the course and how to teach it in the best possible manner. This has been a good aid,” the teacher said.

The deadline set for Jungle Kauria block to achieve the NIPUN goal is December 2023, whereas for the entire



FLN skills test a child's ability to read and recognize language alphabets, and solve simple mathematical problems.

Gorakhpur district, it is December 2024. And teachers like Shazia Bano are vital if the deadline is to be met. They ensure that every pupil understands what he or she is reading, listening to or watching.

“Their observation skills are improving because they know that madam will ask them questions about what they saw on their way to school, and so on,” said Shazia.

While she explained her new teaching methodology, her student Arpita tugged at her *dupatta*. She wanted to show her teacher a train she had made with red, blue and yellow building blocks, complete with an engine. Bano looked at the train and declared, wide-eyed, that she had never seen such a beautiful train, ever! □

STORY 19

A planned approach to classroom teaching

Mamata Pandey makes use of lesson plans to sharpen the creative and critical thinking ability of her students in a primary school in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh.



PHOTOS: PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA

PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA GORAKHPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

AS SHE SHEPHERDS her eight and nine year old students out of the classroom at the end of the school day, Mamata Pandey knows that her duties as a teacher are far from over, and she will be working late into the night.

“I enjoy the peace and quiet of the night and I am most creative then,” smiled Pandey. That is when she pores over her lesson plan book, provided by the state government, that has visual references and recommendations as to how to conduct a class.

Depending on the concepts to be taught



The activities Mamata Pandey conducts helps students get along with each other and encourages children who are shy to open up.

the following day, she plans activities for her students. The 260-page lesson plan book is her friend, guide and saviour since 2019, said the 46-year old assistant teacher at the Primary School Kanya in Gorakhpur.

“How and what to teach cannot be thought of at the spur of the moment while in class. Everything has to be planned in advance,” said Pandey. She takes her cues from the lesson plans. “It could be something to do with numbers, words, names of flowers,” she said.

“The lesson plan focuses on specific learning outcomes and explains how certain concepts can be taught in class in a way the students can understand them,” said Pandey. It also describes the TLM (teaching learning material) to be used, what examples to be referred to from the book, and workbook exercises around it.

The use of lesson plans is strongly recommended by NIPUN (National Initiative for

Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy), as one of its teaching practices.

Pandey teaches class three and has 53 students. The activities she conducts in her classroom stem from the lesson plans, and she uses them effectively as an ice-breaker. It helps children get along with each other and encourages children who are shy to open up.

Whether it is helping students remember the names of fruits, vegetables or animals, or asking them to think up words starting with a specific letter, Pandey keeps her classes entertaining and at the same time educational.

“Ma’am regularly conducts quiz competitions in the class and we both team up and answer questions after consulting each other. These competitions have made me confident, and I have lost my shyness,” said Aryan Yadav, one of her students. The

quizzes are a big hit.

“I feel good when a correct answer from me leads to a win for my team. My friends depend on me for the right answer and that makes me study harder,” said Dilshad Alam, another student.

The idea is not to stress the students. “The time frame to get the students to understand concepts is flexible,” explained Pandey. “Certain concepts take longer than others to be taught and understood, but that is okay,” she added.

“For the first four days of the week, we study new lessons and we revise everything on a Friday. Saturday is the assessment day, a day we are all slightly nervous about,” said Aryan Yadav, a student.

“The assessment day gives us teachers an idea about the students’ performance and helps us organise remedial classes. Without the weekly assessment, it is impossible to work on remediation, which is critical to ensure the child is grade-level competent” said Pandey. The weekly assessments also reassure parents of the students’ performance.

I do, You do, We do

As per the lesson plan book, Pandey follows the ‘I do, You do, We do’ dictum.

“I first show them how to add two numbers. After that, I invite a student to do the same. Then, the entire class chips in to repeat the

Mamata Pandey employs real-life instances like borrowing, sharing treats, etc. to help students grasp fundamental math concepts.

answer in one voice. This creates a feeling of oneness in the classroom,” said Pandey.

“This is so different from how I was taught in a government school in my childhood. I am so glad the ‘top-down approach’ no longer exists,” said the teacher.

“Today, our main task is to draw out all students and involve them in class activities and make them feel a part of the whole. This has a remarkably positive impact on the students,” she said.

The ‘competency-based learning’ aspect of the lesson plan ensures students are competitive too.

“Sometimes the urge to win at a quiz contest gets intense, and some children take a loss badly. But, competition can also teach the children about winning and losing,” said Pandey.

Competition gives the children the ability to navigate both successes and failures, hold their own and work as a team at the same time, she said. □

STORY 20

Creating a level playing field

The classroom is as much for the slow learners as it is for the others, believes Nirmala Singh, a primary school teacher in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh.



PHOTOS: PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA

PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA
KHAIRAILA (GORAKHPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

ON A BALMY summer afternoon, the single storeyed school building basked in the sun. In a classroom, Sultan sat on the edge of his bench, hands raised to ask a question to his teacher, Nirmala Singh, who was teaching mathematics. It was his favourite period

that was underway.

“Haasil [carry method in addition] is my favourite and I can solve it easily. I also use it while getting *ghar ka samaan* [groceries],” said the 10-year-old student.

Last year, when Sultan was in class three of Government Primary School Khairaila in Gorakhpur’s Piprauli block in Uttar



The NIPUN scheme, launched by the Union Ministry of Education in 2021, focuses on strengthening foundational literacy and numeracy skills, commonly known as FLN, in students studying in classes one to three.

Pradesh, the school was the last place he wanted to be.

But, one day, Sultan was taken aback to see his teacher Nirmala Singh, accompanied by some of his classmates, come to his house. She brooked no protest and took him back to school.

This was not the first time nor the last that 39-year-old Nirmala has done this. She thinks nothing of dropping in at her students' homes to get the kids to come to class.

Nirmala teaches mathematics and Hindi to classes one to five. And, her aim, she says, is to bring all the children to a level playing field.

“Each child is different, and they have a different pace of learning. The classroom is as much for the slow learners as it is for the others. And, we use remediation to

ensure they catch up,” she said.

Remediation is one of the teaching practices NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) has spelt out for increasing the impact of learning amongst students.

Nirmala has used remediation as a means to help academically weak students, such as Sultan, cope with their studies. And he is now among the brightest kids in class.

“Empathy is the cornerstone of remediation,” said Nirmala. “We first identify children who need extra help in the classroom. We have identified around 30 such students out of the total 112 in our school. We make sure that those students who have to stay back after school for remedial classes do not develop an inferiority complex,” she explained.

“I ask them about their favourite songs,

food, cartoon characters and other things. I make them recite poems and sing songs. This helps them open up and helps them become comfortable communicating in class too," Nirmala added.

From blackboard to notebook

Nirmala writes down questions for those students who can read and answer on their own. "I go to the desks of the students who I know struggle and write the same questions in their notebooks, but in a way they will easily understand," she said.

"The switch from blackboard teaching to notebook teaching makes them feel more comfortable and the one-on-one sessions with them help them overcome their fear and shyness," she said. "We repeat and explain the fundamental concepts of a lesson any number of times till they get it," the teacher added.

"Earlier, I used to find it hard to understand what was being taught in the class, especially in mathematics," Shivani, a class three student, confessed shyly. "Nirmala ma'am then sat with me and taught me addition. Now, I can easily do double digit addition," she said confidently.

"It took us about a year of work with Shivani to bring her up to par with the rest of the class and now she easily does the sums that are given in class and follows all instructions," Nirmala, the proud teacher, smiled at Shivani.

"I go to the desks of the students who I know struggle and write the same questions in their notebooks, but in a way they will easily understand"

NIRMALA SINGH

GOVERNMENT PRIMARY SCHOOL, KHAIRAILA, GORAKHPUR

An extra mile

As part of remediation practice, the teachers also spend an extra half an hour after school with the children. This time is used to revise what was taught in class that day. The teachers discovered that the students felt more free to ask questions and clarify their doubts.

According to Radhe Shyam Maurya, the headmaster of the school, "The remedial measures were crucial in bridging the chasms left by the COVID-19 pandemic where education came to a halt."

"Unlike private schools, these kids are not privileged enough to have smartphones or a high speed internet connection for online learning. It was these remedial measures that saved the day and got the students back on track," said Maurya. ■

STORY 21

What did you eat for breakfast?

A primary school teacher uses simple questions and her lesson plans to coax and cajole the students out of their shells post COVID pandemic.



PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA

CHARGAWAN (GORAKHPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

IN SEPTEMBER, 2021, when the mass restrictions imposed to contain the COVID-19 outbreak were relaxed and schools were reopened after 18 months, Geeta Devi, a primary school teacher in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, realised she had a massive challenge on her hands.

“The students stared blankly. They barely responded to instructions. It was as if they had lost touch with the outside world... the pandemic had obviously disturbed them deeply,” said the 46-year-old school headmistress of the Primary School.

But two years later, the primary school in Gorakhpur has transformed from sullen silence to chirpy classrooms



After 18 months, when COVID-19 restrictions eased and schools reopened, Geeta Devi, a primary teacher in Gorakhpur, UP, faced a significant challenge.

where students sing songs and rhymes, and participate in quizzes and debate competitions.

And the credit for this, according to Geeta Devi, goes to the lesson plans devised under the NIPUN programme, which recognises the importance of early learning and makes proficiency in reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level the utmost priority.

“The programme is particularly detailed about the ways in which teaching could be made more efficient and also help bond with the students,” the primary school teacher explained. It came in handy to break the ice with students who had been away from school for so long, she added.

The Basic Education Department of Uttar Pradesh has strongly recommended the use of objective and subjective questions in the teacher’s guides it has provided to the primary schools in the state.

Two teacher’s guides — *Aadhaarshila* [foundational learning] and *Dhyaankarshan* [attentive learning] — help the teachers.

“There are two kinds of questions we ask the children. The ‘objective’ questions help them speak up in the classroom as the answer is usually no more than a word or two and therefore not intimidating. And the ‘subjective’ questions inspire students to express themselves in longer discussions and class conversations,” she said.

Pointing to Kalash Jaiswal and Priyanshu who were just promoted to class three, Geeta Devi said they were a handful when they joined school post the pandemic in class one.

“It was a task to keep them at school as they missed no opportunity to run back home. The boys had lost their ability to connect in a social setting. They wore masks all day long even when they did not have to any more. Such was the fear

in these kids,” said the teacher.

Coming back after an 18-month hiatus had unsettled the kids. “Not only did they not answer questions in class, many of them did not even speak to their classmates,” she recalled.

But the objective questions that needed only short responses broke the ice.

“‘What did you eat for breakfast’, ‘which cartoon are you most fond of’, ‘what is your favourite fruit’, etc, helped them loosen up. And helped me make some headway in class,” she said.

The ‘runaway’ kid Kalash Jaiswal said he was so bored at home during the pandemic. And of all the dos and don’ts.

“I was scolded all the time at home... constantly reminded to wear a mask or wash my hands before eating. Mummy and Papa wanted to keep us safe but I was bored of having nothing to do. I stayed in my room most of the time and watched TV and played games on the phone,” said Jaiswal.

“I didn’t want to come to school. I was feeling comfortable at home but my parents forced me to go. I used to think of excuses every day. But, I made friends in class and after a while, I started enjoying coming to school,” the student added.

Once the objective questions began to bear fruit, Geeta Devi graduated to the subjective questions that required longer

As directed by the lesson plans, the subjective questions are aimed at enhancing the descriptive and imaginative abilities of the students.

articulation by the children. They now had to speak in full sentences and describe things in more detail.

As directed by the lesson plans, the subjective questions are aimed at enhancing the descriptive and imaginative abilities of the students.

“When I asked them about their visit to a temple or some fair or a picnic, they would get animated,” smiled Geeta Devi. It was a conscious decision to ask them questions about their personal lives and interests rather than try and get them to talk about something from the curriculum, she said.

The ‘Q&A’ sessions in the classroom gradually gathered steam and whenever a student fluently answered a question, the others were encouraged to applaud him or her.

“As simple and predictable they may seem, these group activities were vital to make students open up and participative in the classroom. Today Kalash and Priyanshu are the most talkative students in their class,” the teacher said with pride. ■

STORY 22

Keeping students on the right track

A teacher at a rural school in Gorakhpur, UP, records the progress of each of her students, on her performance tracker, an invaluable teaching aid that brings out the best in her children and in herself.



PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA

PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA,
BHUSWAL, GORAKHPUR (UTTAR PRADESH)

NAVYA WAS FOND of mathematics but struggled with Hindi when she joined class one at the Primary School at Bhusawal Buzurg village in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. She did not

know this, but her class teacher Meenakshi Tripathi, was aware of her struggle and was watching out for her and tracking her performance closely.

For Tripathi, the tracker is an invaluable teaching aid that helps her monitor her students and help them reach their learning

outcomes. “The performance tracker is like a database which helps me identify what subject or topic a student is having trouble grasping,” Tripathi explained.

In Navya’s case, after observing her for a few days, Tripathi placed her in ‘Group A’. Children in this group had to stay back after school for an hour and they received special attention in the subject they were lagging behind in. It was a remedial class.

Two weeks into remediation, Navya’s grasp of Hindi improved significantly, and very soon she did not have to stay back that extra hour after school.

According to the teacher, the remedial classes are carried out in such a way that the students who are in it do not feel slighted.

“We ensure that the children do not feel they are any less than the other kids. If done right, we have seen how remediation makes the children become confident and more forthcoming in class. They open up,” Tripathi said.

Tripathi who joined this school as an assistant teacher in 2020, is often to be seen scrutinising a big register that is the performance tracker of her class. She regularly updates it.

The tracker is part of the ‘teacher guides’ provided by the education department of the state government under the NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy), launched by the Union Ministry of Education, in July 2021.

According to the teacher, the remedial classes are carried out in such a way that the students who are in it do not feel slighted.

“These teacher guides have made classroom teaching smooth. We are guided by a specialised module which helps us produce better results in less time. The tracker helps me pinpoint the real time progress of my pupils,” said Tripathi.

It is on the basis of the tracker’s findings that the students in the class are provided remedial classes.

The students are also encouraged to participate in class performances. Ansh Yadav and his classmate Raunak Singh, both seven years old, love to participate in the skits directed by their class teacher.

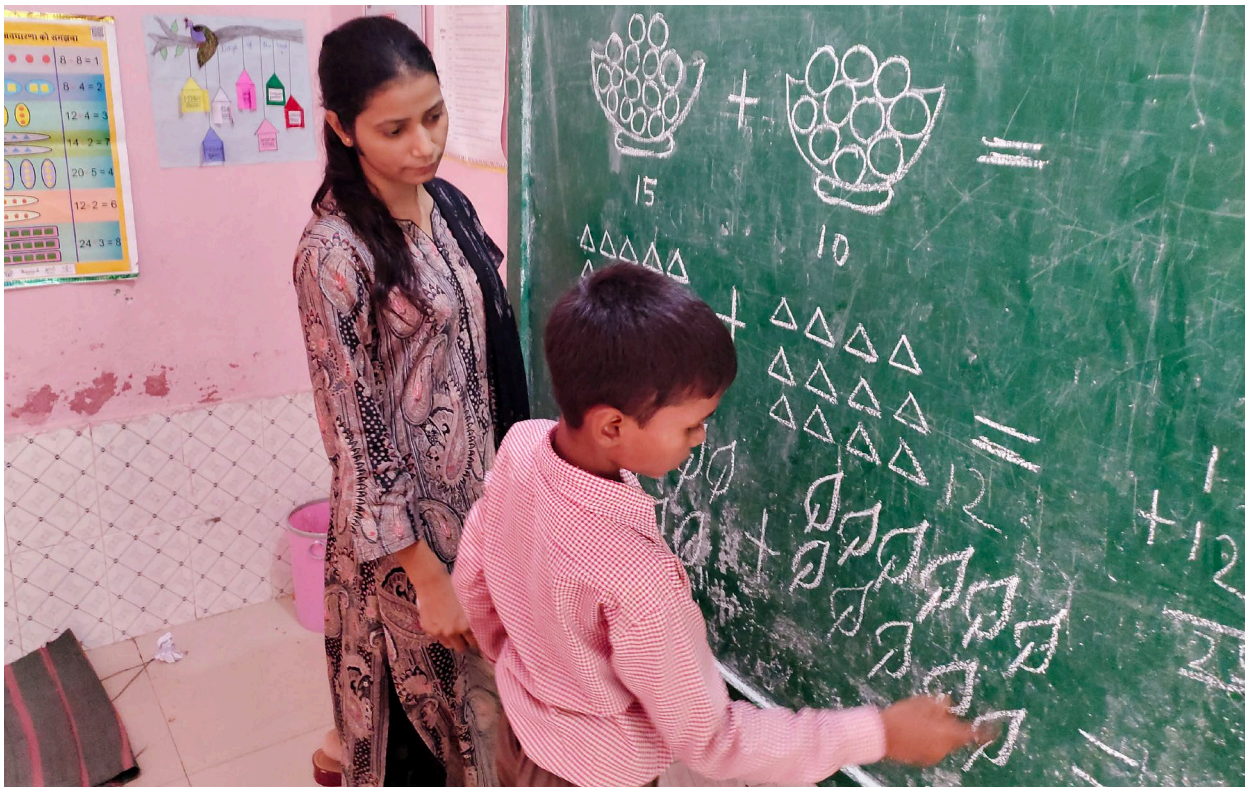
“I like to play the role of the clever fox. I like to outwit others,” Ansh laughed.

“These skits are recommended by the lesson plans and teacher guides we have received as study material from the education department. These activities help rid students of their shyness,” Tripathi said. And, all these facts are entered into her performance tracker. □

STORY 23

The writing is on the wall

Graffiti is the unlikely teaching aid used by teachers in a rural school in Gorakhpur, UP to enhance communication skills in their young students. The paintings ignite their curiosity and encourage conversations which in turn instil confidence in them



PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA

PRATYAKSH SRIVASTAVA
MANIKAPAR, GORAKHPUR (UTTAR PRADESH)

FOR VIJAY KUMAR Chaudhary, teaching students in the primary school is not merely an occupation but a calling. He lives in a room inside the school premises and likes nothing better than painting educational graffiti

on the walls of the classrooms.

“The kids really like it. The graffiti adds colour to the classrooms but also acts as a teaching aid to the teachers who teach in it,” he said. The 44-year-old teacher was posted as an assistant teacher at the school in 2010 and is now its headmaster. He presently teaches classes one and five.

Anshika, one of his students, perks up as he asks her to tell the story of an injured dog that a little girl takes home and looks after. There is a poster on the wall on which is a pictorial depiction of the dog and the little girl, and Anshika, looks at it and confidently narrates the story to her classmates.

Chaudhary is big on pictorial presentations. He uses posters, and the graffiti of the wall and firmly believes the children benefit from this.

As part of the NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) programme launched by the Union Ministry of Education, in July 2021, teachers are encouraged to use visual aid in teaching students in class one. Teacher guides provided by the state government guide the teachers on how to go about this.

Chaudhary believes that happy children are receptive children and therefore it is the duty of the teachers to make sure they are happy in school.

The teachers use the graffiti clad walls as teaching aids. They ask their students questions about what is painted on the walls.

When Chaudhary asked Hrithik to point towards his favourite vegetable, he pointed to the pumpkin. This was followed by a conversation around the vegetable.

Hrithik proceeded to inform his class-

Chaudhary believes that happy children are receptive children and therefore it is the duty of the teachers to make sure they are happy in school.

mates that he had pumpkin along with poori, paratha, roti and sometimes rice.

These are the exchanges that improve the fluency of the children and encourage them to speak freely, Chaudhary said. "We start with questions that require just a word or two in answer, then gradually graduate to questions that require the students to speak longer sentences and use more words," he explained.

The students also have a say in what they will eat that day at the school.

"We ask the cooks to prepare the meal which students say they want to eat," Chaudhary said.

For Riya, it would be soya sabzi [soya nuggets] that she votes for every time she is asked what she wants to eat that day.

"It makes them feel involved in the school. Children like to come to a place where they are heard and their choices are respected. This keeps the dropout rates in check and also increases attendance," he said. ■



SECTION 3

REIMAGINING EDUCATION

TEACHERS IN RURAL INDIA ARE TRANSFORMING TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESSES BY EMBRACING NEW TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATING TEACHING METHODS.



STORY 24

PHOTOS: AAVISHKAAR NGO

Falling in love with maths and science

A non-profit organisation in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh, reimagines teaching and learning, and trains young teachers to adopt innovative methods to bring a change in the way government schools work.

RAJA MUZAFFAR BHAT
PALAMPUR, HIMACHAL PRADESH

JEEVA PLANS TO set up a Mathematical Activity Centre in her city Madurai in Tamil Nadu. A Teach for India (TFI) Fellow, Jeeva attended a special training programme in mathematics and science at the Aavishkaar Campus at the picturesque Kandbari

village on the outskirts of Palampur town, in Kangra district, Himachal Pradesh.

“Aavishkaar has made me fall in love with these subjects. I now believe that mathematics and science are not tough subjects at all,” Jeeva said.

Like her is Nidhi Kumari, a 20-year-old from Patna, Bihar, who shed her fear of math-



Several skill development programmes are offered by Sajhe Sapne, an initiative nurtured and incubated by Aavishkaar on its campus.

ematics at Aavishkaar. “Teaching these subjects to others was unimaginable for me. But, after I joined the primary maths-educator course at Aavishkaar, I developed a passion for the subject,” said Nidhi who teaches at a primary government school at Kandbari village in Palampur. It is one of several that Aavishkaar has adopted.

Aavishkaar, was set up in 2014. The institution works with both educators and students to reimagine teaching and learning. There are fellowships to be had here for young teachers who want to bring a change in the way government schools work. It conducts capacity building programmes and offers residential camps for students.

“More than 8,000 government school teachers in Himachal Pradesh have been trained by Aavishkaar in association with Wipro Foundation during the last three to

four years. We also work with the Department of Education of the Central Tibetan Administration,” said Sandhya Gupta, co-founder of Aavishkaar. She, along with her husband Sarit Sharma, founded Aavishkaar in 2014.

“The teaching and learning of maths and science stand on four pillars: visualisation, contextualization, making content relevant, and constant engagement. And we keep these in mind while creating content,” Sandhya explained.

One of Aavishkaar’s main aims is to create maths educators for primary classes. “I was not prepared to become a primary maths educator. I was, in fact, scared of mathematics,” laughed Anjali Devi, a 20-year-old from Banuri village near Palampur. “Three years ago I had applied for a skill development course at Aavishkaar, and since there was no vacancy in



A special Aarohan maths education programme was launched by Aavishkaar in 2021.

the course I wanted to do, I was forced to sign up for Aarohan, a maths educator programme,” she said.

Several skill development programmes are offered by Sajhe Sapne, an initiative incubated by Aavishkaar on its campus. There are three courses for girls – a training programme in rural development, a programme on front-end web development and, a primary maths educator course that Anjali signed up for, reluctantly.

“I was trained as a primary maths educator for nine months. Within two months, I fell in love with maths. Teaching mathematics in primary schools is a challenging task, but I now have a passion for it,” said Anjali.

A special Aarohan maths education programme was launched by Aavishkaar in 2021 in collaboration with Sajhe Sapne and Ashvattha Learning Communities. It trains young women from rural and under-

privileged communities.

As Aavishkaar Fellows they can also become science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) leaders. “These Fellows are making mathematics a visual experience, relevant, contextual and engaging through a culture of debate, discussion and jurisdiction,” co-founder Sarit Sharma said.

In July last year, Aavishkaar organised a five-day workshop each for science and maths teachers of 50 Sambhota Tibetan Schools across the country. “More than 95 per cent of the Tibetan teachers found the sessions engaging. More than 96 per cent found the sessions to be relevant and useful, and 90 per cent of the teachers found the sessions effective and understandable,” Sandhya said. ■

STORY 25

A village school breaks stereotypes of rural education

Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya in rural Uttar Pradesh has a skill centre that trains rural students and prepares them for the job market once they leave school.



SHIVANI GUPTA

KUSHMA DEVI IS engrossed in fixing her desktop computer, plugging mouse and keyboard wires into the CPU. The 17-year-old then gets busy with some graphic designing.

She and her classmates who are in class 12 of Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya in Kunaura

panchayat, about 40 kilometres from the state capital Lucknow, are designing posters for Diwali.

Kushma deftly searches for copyright-free pictures and downloads a free picture of a butterfly. "I like butterflies, because they can go anywhere they want to," Kushma said with a smile. "I enjoy making posters. I do not want to do *silai kadhai* (stitching



Dr SB Misra, who started the school in 1972 along with the students.

and embroidery work),” she added.

Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya has set up a skill centre, called the Swayam Skill Centre, specially to train village students in graphic designing. More than 15 students, including rural girls, are learning the basics of graphic designing at the school. There are several other skill-building courses too.

Leading this initiative is Dr SB Misra, a geologist and founder of Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya, who started this school in 1972.

“After conventional education till class twelve, students struggle to find jobs. At the skill centre we now offer them courses so that they can be job ready when they leave school,” he said. Housekeeping,

photography, repairing (mobiles and computers), and so on are some of the courses on offer.

“This is how these rural students will develop confidence and compete with their urban counterparts,” Dr Misra said.

“Rural kids are unable to compete with urban kids because they lack learning opportunities. I believe if schools equip themselves with technology and modern methods then rural education will gallop forward,” he added.

“Girls in villages are usually told to learn *chauka bartan* (manage kitchen chores). I was also told the same. Now I can do something different by learning other skills



The skill centre aims to help break stereotypes and provide children in rural areas with opportunities to broaden their horizons.

at school,” said Mohini Singh, another class 12 student.

Neelesh Misra, founder of Gaon Connection, who is Vice President of the management committee of the school, said the skill centre would help break stereotypes, and allow children in rural areas to broaden their playing field.

“In the time when India’s media industry is booming and everyone needs graphic designers, can’t rural kids help in that,” he asked.

“I never thought I would work at a computer. Now I make posters. It gives me confidence and hope,” Jitendra, a class 12 student learning poster making at the school, said proudly.

The school also has a virtual class centre equipped with a projector, a microphone, a projection screen and high speed Internet.

Much before the COVID19 pandemic forced shutdown of educational institutes and made online learning a norm, Bharatiya Gramin Vidyalaya started long-distance online classes in 2019.

“The internet has reached villages. Rural kids want to learn new things, and there are teachers in urban areas who want to teach them. We are trying to make that connection through the Internet and virtual classrooms,” said Neelesh Misra.

Volunteers from India to the United Arab Emirates teach these students English, Physics and Mathematics.

“Be it teaching graphic designing, video and sound editing or Physics and English classes, the virtual classes supplement face to face classes. I think this initiative can help address the gap in the education system of rural schools,” said Neelesh Misra. ■

STORY 26

Tree top classrooms and millet cakes

Anantmool, a village school in rural Bihar breaks gender stereotypes in its predominantly tribal children, and keeps them connected with their roots.



AISHWARYA TRIPATHI

WEDNESDAYS ARE COMMUNITY days at the Anantmool school and preparations are on as 55 children prepare to bake a millet cake in a wood-fire oven. The village school in Jamui district of Bihar is buzzing with action.

School founder, Shivani Kumari, encourages her students to include locally grown ingredients in their cooking classes. They use mahua, mushrooms, and locally-produced millets to experiment with, in the

school kitchen.

But, it took some time for Shivani and co-founder Niwas Kumar, to get their male students on-board with the activities which are considered to be a girl's department.

Spread over half-an-acre of land in Nontara village of Chakai block, Anantmool is breaking the binary concepts of gender in children at the foundational level.

A brainchild of Niwas and Shivani, Anantmool was set up as a learning centre in

April, 2022 and had 30 enrollments at the start. Niwas is a native of Jamui.

Presently, Anantmool caters to children from three tribal villages. The children studying at this school are made to question gender stereotypes at each step, from the games they play to the dress they wear to the sentences they encounter in their textbooks. Slowly and steadily, the gender-defined concepts of society are fading here.

The school uses the government's National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) books in its curriculum. But a course correction unfolds here almost every day. For example, a game locally called Kit-Kit or hopscotch, was fondly played by both boys and girls here but the textbook identified the game as a girl-specific one.

"Any game can be played by anyone," 11-year-old Parmeshwar, a student at Anantmool said. "I play it and I think what is written in the book is wrong," he said. The students then corrected that sentence in the textbook.

The special 'tree-classes' of Anantmool are much talked about! Every day, the students along with their teachers climb the trees in the school campus, to study English. The approach hits two birds with a single arrow.

First, when the students are to climb the tree, they question the gender-defined dress code of trousers and skirts. If they realise that climbing might be easier in trousers, they would slowly switch to that, a teacher pointed out.

The children studying at Anantmool are made to question gender stereotypes at each step.

Secondly, English is an uneasy subject for them. When they sit on a tree while studying this, their mind is so preoccupied balancing themselves, that they drop the English-induced nervousness.

The efforts are showing in the response of children. Parmeshwar, who has been attending Anantmool for two months, either addresses his educators by their name or as 'teacher'— a gender-neutral term as compared to 'sir' or 'madam'.

Rina has been studying in Anantmool for a year and her favourite game is football. Her peers, Pradipa, Anita, Debashish and Parmeshwar, are trying hard to catch up with the 11-year-old's goalkeeping skills. "I love playing football with my friends and the best player is Rina. I can never score a goal when she is the goalkeeper," Parmeshwar said.

Anantmool derives its name from a tiny aromatic herb which grows in Asia and has deep roots, making it almost impossible to uproot. Amongst a rural community, where there are many gender barriers and gender-defined roles, Anantmool is taking small steps to normalise the gender-free education model. □

STORY 27

Vocational courses in this village high school get students job ready

At the Purandarpur Higher Secondary School in Bankura, West Bengal, students learn farming as a vocational course. Seven of its students have made it to the top 10 merit list of the recent exam held by West Bengal State Council of Technical & Vocational Education and Skill Development.



PHOTOS: MADHU SUDAN CHATTERJEE

MADHU SUDAN CHATTERJEE

NEHA BANERJEE STOOD first in the examination in the vocational courses offered by the West Bengal Board of Technical and Vocational Education and Skill Development.

Daughter of a daily wage worker, Neha, who studied agriculture at Purandarpur Higher Secondary School, in Bankura district, West Bengal, is jubilant.

Neha knows this is an opportunity of a lifetime where she can equip herself with skills



Seven students from the school have been placed among the toppers on the merit list in the results of the exam held by the West Bengal State Council of Technical & Vocational Education and Skill Development.

that will help her get a job and support her father who is suffering from cancer and too poor to afford proper treatment. She will soon leave her village home to further study at the Bidhan Chandra Krishi Viswavidyalaya in Kalyani, about 60 kilometres away.

Most of the people in and around the village, including Neha's father, are marginal farmers, farm labourers, or fishers, who struggle to earn a living. For many of the students who study at Purandarpur Higher Secondary School, it is nothing short of a miracle that they are able to study at all.

This year, seven students from the school have been placed among the toppers on the merit list in the results of the exam held by the West Bengal State Council of Technical & Vocational Education and Skill Development.

Headmaster Soumitra Banerjee couldn't be prouder. "Vocational courses were started in the school in 2006. These included information technology, agriculture, and mobile repairing courses, which

are taught to them in classes 11 and 12. These courses have been very useful to the students coming from rural backgrounds and offer them job opportunities in the future," the headmaster said.

The school, established in 1961, has about 900 students studying from classes five to twelve.

Shraboni Shit is the joint first rank holder with Neha, and also comes from straitened circumstances. Her father is a tempo driver. Second rank holder, Pallab Singh is the son of a mason.

The joint first rank holders and the second ranker all studied agriculture, and all three have been offered seats at the Bidhan Chandra Krishi Viswavidyalaya in Kalyani.

"We have struggled to make ends meet ever since the pandemic. I live with my grandmother and parents in a hut. The school and our teachers have helped us in every possible way," said second-rank-



Purandarpur village lies about 200 kilometres away from the state capital Kolkata, closer to the West Bengal-Jharkhand border.

holder Pallab who lives in Bikna village.

Agriculture is a sought after vocational course at the Purandarpur school, said Amit Parui who teaches vocational agriculture at the school.

“We learn how to increase production and take care of plants. We have a growing interest in agriculture. We now know how to grow three-coloured flowers on a jaba (hibiscus) tree using modern horticulture science,” Akash Lo, a student, said.

During the pandemic, the teachers of Purandarpur Higher Secondary School ensured the students did not discontinue or drop out of school.

“They visited us in our homes, distributed study materials and question papers and urged our parents to make sure we study,” recalled Ananya Kundu, a student of class ten. “They even provided us with exercise books and pens,” added Upasona Singh, a tenth-grader.

Nirmal Mondal, a parent of a student of Goira village, said that the teachers were always at hand to help. “This encouraged our children to continue to study during the pandemic. The teachers would collect the homework they did and correct them too,” he said.

“The local and district school administration is proud of the work done by the teachers of Purandarpur School,” said Sajal Mahato, the local School Inspector of Bankura Sadar East Circle.

According to Mahato, the vocational courses were welcomed by students coming from the economically weaker families as mainstream education was expensive and a vocational education made them job-ready when they passed out.

“They are all wanting to get a job as soon as they can to support their families. And, this is the reason we do not charge the students of the vocational course any fee for admissions, registrations or examinations,” the school inspector said. □

STORY 28

A 'Model' school in Kashmir streamlines its education processes with online tools

Online integrated software helps a primary school in Sheikhpora Kreeri village near Srinagar, J&K, create, deliver and track educational courses and outcomes in a simple way.



PHOTOS: SYED SHADAB ALI GILLANI

SYED SHADAB ALI GILLANI

AT A TIME when enrollment is dropping at government-run schools as parents prefer to send their children to private schools, the story of the Government Primary School in Sheikhpora village in Kreeri tehsil, 55

kilometres from the capital Srinagar, has a different story to tell.

Irfan Ahmed Shah, a 33-year-old teacher at this school, has a large part to play in this change. Shah is leveraging social media and technology to attract more enrolments to the school. He has created an official



The education imparted in model schools should be holistic, with emphasis on academics, physical well being and emotional wellbeing.

website for the school that also has a YouTube channel of its own.

According to Shah, the school was one of the pilot schools in the Kashmir valley where the learning management system (LMS) was introduced during COVID-19.

LMS is an online integrated software used for creating, delivering, tracking, and reporting educational courses and outcomes. This learning initiative was introduced in the school by the Directorate of School Education in Kashmir.

“We have online access available for all official school-related information, including grades, attendance, exam results, student bios, etc. It is a simple and transparent method to keep track of things. Results, attendance, and any other pertinent data is available to students as well as their parents,” Shah explained.

The school had already taken steps before the pandemic to educate the parents on

how they could now monitor the academic progress of their children. “This made it simple for us to conduct online classes during the COVID-19 lockdown because the parents had already received training about online classes, results, and other topics through WhatsApp/ YouTube or even in person, way back in 2017. As a result, the children had no trouble attending lectures and completing and submitting assignments online,” he said.

According to Bashir Dar, a parent of a standard one student living in Sheikhpura village, “We receive frequent online updates regarding their academic progress, test results, schedules, and admissions information. The system is safe, secure, and simple to use. Also, it allows us to keep track of everything from one location,” he said.

The District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) in Baramulla recognised this school as the best institution during the COVID-19 pandemic.



The teacher hopes that the administration will provide more support in tackling the school's infrastructure.

According to Shah, the right use of technology could go a long way in improving standards of education and more government schools should go for it.

"I started teaching at this school in 2016, and back then only 24 students were enrolled. Later in 2020, admissions rose to 114, and this year, it is 122," Shah said.

It was in 2018 that the Government Primary School in Sheikhpura launched its website, which was inaugurated by the Zonal Education Officer (ZEO) during the school's annual day celebrations. At this event, the school was hailed as the 'Model Primary School' of the Wagoora Block, in Baramulla, and to this day, it is the only 'Model' school there.

A model school uses innovative learning and teaching practices. The education is holistic, with emphasis on academics, physical well being and emotional wellbeing.

According to Shah, in the financial year 2022-2023, an annual school grant of Rs 25,000 was provided by the central government Samagra Shiksha, but the school spent nearly Rs 60,000. "We tiled the hallway and maintained the kitchen area where the mid day meals for children are prepared. The five staff members [including Shah] contributed towards the additional costs out of their own pockets," Shah said.

The school has also been appreciated for taking part in the "Back to the Village" initiative run by the Jammu and Kashmir Government. The programme is to bridge the gap between the achievable and achieved goals in development, take governance to doorsteps of the rural and inaccessible areas, and generate credible and empirical feedback. ■

STORY 29

Amitabh Bachchan's KBC finds a new avatar at a govt school in Mirzapur

Inspired by the Kaun Banega Crorepati game show, a weekly quiz on general science in a village school in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, keeps its students on their toes and wins a lot of praise.

BRIJENDRA DUBEY

MIRZAPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

UNRATTLED BY THE trains that thunder past every now and then, about 40 bright-eyed children lean forward, taking in the action on the stage. A quiz contest is underway and the tension is palpable. A student is in the hot seat, and the time is ticking. Will she or won't she get the right answer?

Every Saturday, Purva Madhyamik Vidyalaya, in Jaasa Bhagora village in Chanbe block in Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh, sees an edge-of-the-seat session of KBIC, or Kaun Banega Intelligent Child, very reminiscent of its more famous predecessor, Amitabh Bachchan's show Kaun Banega Crorepati!

Satyendra Singh, a 40-year-old government school teacher wanted to do something to entertain his students and at the same time get them to learn something, and the quiz session is doing just that.



A 40-year-old government school teacher wanted to do something to engage the rural students better with their studies in an entertaining, yet impactful way. PHOTOS: BRIJENDRA DUBEY

Children from classes six to eight study at the Purva Madhyamik Vidyalay. "I came to this school in 2016 from Chitrakoot on a transfer. At that time there were just 92 children studying in the school and there was just one teacher," said Singh.



The children in the school were great fans of the television show, Kaun Banega Crorepati.

Soon three more teachers were posted there and they decided that they would put their heads together and come up with an effective teaching plan. When they realised that the children in their school were great fans of the television show, Kaun Banega Crorepati, they decided to capitalise on that.

“So began KBIC,” Singh said. Two students from each class are selected to find questions from their general science books that they then put to their classmates in the morning assembly, after the prayers. Each of the selected students poses three questions. These questions are noted down by the class monitors into a notebook and compiled into a collection.

“We now have a big database of questions and it is these questions we ask at the KBIC. Those students who are interested in participating in the game, take the questions from their class monitors and prepare for them,” Singh explained.

He has a pact with the children that he

will only ask questions from the store of questions they all now have. Before the game begins, the students are asked a question and whoever answers first and correctly gets to participate.

“In each session of KBIC we ask 10 questions from the collection we have and depending on their performance, we then distribute certificates that have ‘Good’, ‘Better’, ‘Best’ and ‘Intelligent’ written on them,” the teacher said.

Just like it is there in KBC, the school’s KBIC also has a ‘Hot Seat’. The student who won the ‘Intelligent’ certificate is asked more questions. He has the same option Amitabh Bachchan’s participants have.

There are three lifelines, one ‘50-50’ option where two wrong answers from the multiple choices are removed, making it easier for the student to make a safe guess, and the final option where they can ask the audience for help.

“This school is much better than any private or convent school that we all wanted our children to go to,” Mahendra Kumar Gupta, whose niece Ayushi Gupta studies in this school, said. He said the innovative methods teachers use in the school to get children to engage better, understand better and be informed, has worked wonders.

Due to the efforts of Singh and other teachers, the student strength at Purva Madhyamik Vidyalaya has jumped from 92 children to now 178. □

STORY 30

Drama and theatre in the classroom

Shweta Singh has discovered the magic theatre can work in her classroom. The teacher in Siktaur primary school in Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh uses street play to make students learn better in class and also be social mobilisers in their village.



AISHWARYA TRIPATHI
GORAKHPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

A GROUP OF THIRD graders huddle underneath a Peepal tree, at the Siktaur primary school. “*Suno suno bhai suno suno, aaj yaha par*

kya hoga... Natak hoga, Natak hoga,” the performers cry out, inviting people to stop and watch their *natak* (play).

Dressed in their brown uniforms, Sangam, Srishti, Anshika are about to perform a skit about the impact of mobile phones



The primary school teacher feels that if lessons are not taught in an engaging way they can haunt the children forever.

on our lives.

Every now and then *nukkad nataks* brighten up the village chaupal, thanks to 37-year-old Shweta Singh, who brings her students here to act, sing and do drama.

Shweta joined Siktaur primary school in Khorabar block in Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh in 2010 to teach Class III. As most of the syllabus involved stories and poems, the teacher decided to use drama as an entertaining way to engage her students, and get them to remember the lessons better.

Back in their classroom, Shweta's class of 48 enthralled students, listens to the story, Gavaiya Gadha. The excitement grows as the teacher modulates her voice, to switch between the two characters of the story – the donkey and the jackal. Some students crack up with laughter as others watch open mouthed.

The students clap loudly in appreciation as the story ends, after which they are called over to the blackboard one by one to write out the difficult words they encountered in the story, such as *dhobi*, *gadha*, *siyaar*, *kapda*.

Shweta Singh knows how roleplay is important. More so because she depends on it to communicate with her 15-year-old daughter, Aadita, who is autistic. "Autism is a state where someone has a lot of treasure locked in a trunk, but the key has been thrown away. My daughter finds communication challenging," Shweta said.

The teacher was introduced to the concept of drama being an ideal way to interact with people in the autism spectrum. "For two years I took training in Lucknow to teach my daughter. There, they taught us picture language and how an autistic child can be calmed down through acting and using facial expressions for communica-



As most of the syllabus involved stories and poems, Shweta Singh decided to use drama as an entertaining way to engage her students.

tion. This comes handy in my classroom as well because every child comes from a different background,” she said.

“Drama is a very strong medium to explain or spread social messages. I keep making the students do nukkad natak, which work really well with the rural community, as many are unlettered here. We had done a few on sanitation habits and cleanliness and it did have an impact on the village community,” she said.

Shweta confessed that she was a movie buff right from a young age and loved acting. And, once when she had gone to spend her vacations at an aunt’s, boredom drove her to produce, direct and act in a play, Kittu Gilehri. She played all the roles in the story.

“The kids who came to watch were amazed, and they couldn’t wait to be friends with

that-girl-who-played-all-the-characters-in-a-play,” Shweta laughed.

Sangam Pasvan, one of Shweta’s students, loves drama and is quite famous for mimicking animal sounds. “I can mimic the sound of a dog, cat and donkey. All this has been taught to us by Ma’am. We laugh so hard when she enacts these out,” Pasvan said.

“When I joined, I didn’t know anything. I now know the tables, months of the year and also read Hindi fluently. Ma’am teaches so well with her acting,” Srishti, another student who only just joined the school three months ago, said.

Meanwhile, Shweta’s class is in happy chaos as the children are busy braying to each other just like the *dhobi*’s donkey in the story their teacher just read out to them. ■

STORY 31

It is 'A for Abdul Kalam' in this gurukul in Nalanda, Bihar

In a gurukul in Hussainpur village in Nalanda district, Bihar, Monu Kumar revives learning traditions of the ancient Nalanda University.



PHOTOS: MANOJ CHOUDHARY

MANOJ CHOUDHARY

MONU KUMAR, AN engineer, left his job and started a gurukul in Hussainpur village in Nalanda district of Bihar. “We teach students science, mathematics, philosophy, meta physics, history, sanskrit grammar, hindi, etc. They learn about Ramanujam, Buddha, Vivekanand, Aryabhatta and other personalities, and subjects the children’s school syllabus do not touch upon,” Monu Kumar said.

“We teach them A for ‘Arjun’ or ‘Abul Kalam’, and not A for ‘Apple,’” he smiled and added that he wanted to revive the old academic system of the ancient Nalanda University.

Nalanda University, established during the Gupta Dynasty in Magadh (now Patna) in the fifth century, was covered in glory. The university had nearly 2,000 teachers and 10,000 students studying Sanskrit, grammar, medicine, mathematics and other subjects. It was destroyed in the 13th century after which it was partially



Inspired by the excellent system of education the Nalanda University provided in ancient India, Monu Kumar, an engineer, left his job and started a gurukul.

restored and existed till 1400. Today it is a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) World Heritage Site.

Monu Kumar has drafted a separate curriculum based on the correlation of Vedanta with mathematics, history, and Indian culture and tradition. Students who can read and write can join the gurukul.

At present, there are 11 students of which five are girls. Since 2021, the gurukul has imparted free education to over 100 students.

The students, who are enrolled at Hussainpur Middle School, attend the classes at gurukul for three to four hours

every day. “Despite the children having completed high school, their academic standards are very poor. They are ignorant about the basics of mathematics, science, and Indian culture, and know nothing about Vedanta, Bhagwat Gita, Bible, etc. I try to rectify that through a combination of the old academic system and advanced digital technology,” Monu Kumar said.

Students enjoy the learning process at the gurukul. “I now know so much about the rich and varied culture of our land that I was not taught about at school,” Puja Kumari, a class seven student who attends the gurukul, said.

Another student Shanti Kumari said she wanted to change the wrong perception of Bihari culture. “We girls at the gurukul



At present, there are 11 students studying in the gurukul, out of which five are girls.

will make our family members and fellow residents aware about historic culture and achievements. We want to change the general mindset about Bihari tradition [as being inferior]," she said.

Monu Kumar said that his mission was to let students gain knowledge instead of reading books to pass exams. "History is being taught not just to inform students about their past but they are being told about its importance in our life. They are being motivated to create history as it happened earlier," the teacher added.

His dream was to reestablish the excellence of teaching centres of ancient India such as Nalanda University, Taxila University, and Vikramshila University. "India was a centre of academic excellence in ancient times and by reviving similar traditions, it is possible to once again raise a Buddha or an Aryabhata," the teacher said.

The B Tech from Kurukshetra University in Haryana said he had a passion to revive the old academic system. He worked as a senior lecturer in Swami Vivekanand Institute of Engineering and Technology in 2018-19 at the Punjab Technical University at Chandigarh in Punjab.

In 2020, he returned to Bihar. He began the gurukul and in order to earn a living and sustain the gurukul, he began coaching classes for students of high school, IIT aspirants, and those who wanted to appear for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE). He charged them a nominal fee.

"This is just the beginning of my journey. There are challenges, but I will expand the gurukul, and continue teaching the way they did at Nalanda University. I will register my gurukul with the state government and systemic study will be imparted to students," Monu Kumar said. ■

STORY 32

Making space for Assamese culture in modern education

In a village school in Sonitpur, Assam, a principal has made sure that her 850 students are well-versed in Bihu and Bagurumba folk dances.



SAYANTANI DEB

ON APRIL 14, 2023, more than 11,000 dancers and drummers gathered at the Sarusajai Stadium in Guwahati. They had come from across Assam to participate in the Guinness World Records for the Largest Bihu Dance, the northeastern state's traditional folk dance. Amid the thousands of performers,

seven young participants were students of a rural government school in Pithakhowa village of Sonitpur district located over 220 kilometres from the venue.

Sixteen-year-old Chayanika Devi was one of the performers from Chandranath Sarma Higher Secondary School of Pithakhowa village. "It was an out-of-the-world feeling. Never in my dreams did I think I



Meenakshi Goswami receiving her award from President Draupadi Murmu.

would dance in front of the Prime Minister,” she said. Monjit Nath, another 14-year-old student of the village school, played the drums. “It was an amazing experience. The cultural exposure I got in school has helped me a lot to keep up with other expert drummers at the event,” he said.

Like Chayanika and Monjit, almost all of the 850 students of Chandranath Sarma Higher Secondary School, are soaked in the culture and traditions of their state.

And the credit for all this goes to Meenakshi Goswami, the principal of the school. “All you need to be a teacher is a love for the children,” 59-year-old Goswami said.

In 1989 Goswami, joined the government school as an English teacher. She was determined to bring about positive changes in the school, which, lacked infrastructure and had a high dropout rate.

Today, there are more than 850 students enrolled in Chandranath Sarma Higher Secondary School, all coming from BPL (Below Poverty Line) families.

Goswami has made sure the students are connected with their culture and tradition. “Assam is home to a large number of indigenous tribes such as Bodo, Tiwa, Rabha, Mising, Karbi and Dimasa,” said the principal. “I have always maintained that while the children are updating themselves and keeping up with the modern changes, they should not forget their own roots,” she said.

Almost every student in the village school knows how to play the traditional dhol, pepa and gogona. These musical instruments are fast disappearing.

In May 2017, when she became the principal of Chandranath Sarma Higher Secondary School, almost right away, she

broke a 58-year-old tradition of the boys-only school. The village school, which was established in 1959, had only boys studying in it till 2017. Goswami began to take in girls between classes 6 and 10. Earlier, girls from other schools joined Chandranath Sarma Government Higher Secondary School only in classes 11 and 12. Now there are almost as many girls as there are boys in each class.

“Since childhood I have heard only good things about the school and I always wanted to study there. However, that was not possible because there were only boys in the secondary section. But, my wish came true when the school began enrolling girls from class 6 to 10,” said Hiya, who joined the school in class 7.

“Due to lack of enough money, we could not send our son to a private school. But, he has been studying in this school since class six and we have no regrets whatsoever,” said Bhanjana Devi, mother of Tanmoy Bora, a Class 10 student. “My husband and I are very happy that our son is receiving such a good education as well as moral values,” she said.

Munindra Kumar Nath, a teacher at Chandranath Sarma Higher Secondary School said he did not think twice about pulling his son out of a private school and enrolling him at the village school, where he is in the tenth standard. “I feel blessed that my son is studying in a school where I too studied many years ago. I passed out in 1987. Be it infrastructure, teacher-pupil ratio or cleanli-

When she became the principal, Meenakshi Goswami almost right away broke the 58-year-old tradition of the boys only school, and started enrolling girls.

ness, this school is no less than any private school,” said the teacher. “It is because of the dynamic administration of Meenakshi Baideo whose efforts to promote Assam’s ethnic culture and traditions are really commendable,” he added.

The teachers of the school have created a student welfare fund to which every teacher contributes Rs 100 every month. This fund is used to purchase sweaters, shoes, dresses for the students for cultural functions. It also provides medical support to the students and their parents if required.

Goswami was conferred with the National Teacher Award on Teachers Day 2022. “I am very attached to my students, they are my everything. It is their blessings that has made me what I am today, and for that I can’t thank them enough,” she said. □

STORY 33

Gaon Mitra bring drop-out tribal kids back to school

Learning centres set up in Malkangiri district, Odisha, persuade children of migrant labourers to return to schools after the pandemic.



PRAGATI PARVA
MALKANGIRI, ODISHA

GUPTA MAJHI WAS in class eight at the Dhungiaput Upper Primary School, when the COVID lockdown happened in March 2020. His father, who worked as a labourer in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh, returned to Dhungiaput village in Malkangiri in

Odisha. There was no work at the village and the family from the Dora community was cash-strapped.

Gupta, who was 13 years old then, became an agricultural labourer to support his family of six. Two years later, when his school reopened in February, 2022, he was in no mood to resume his studies. But the teenager is now back to school.



The COVID pandemic made it worse for the families of migrant workers as their children fell through the cracks and were finding it difficult to come back to the education stream.

All thanks to Geeta Pradhani, a Gaon Mitra in the community learning centre in Dhungiaput village.

A year ago, 15 learning centres were set up in 45 villages that came under the Mathili block of Malkangiri. Educators were selected from the respective communities and designated as Gaon Mitras, to visit rural households and encourage children to get back to studying.

These learning centres, set up in June 2022 with the support of project Samadhan of the Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), provide a second chance to drop-out kids to pursue education and bridge the learning gap left behind by the pandemic. There are about 1,238 students in the 15 learning centres in Malkangiri.

These are not formal schools but centres

run in community halls or anganwadi centres, or even at the homes of the Gaon Mitras. They give free coaching of regular courses and also compensate for the learning loss incurred during the pandemic.

“I was afraid of going to school as I had forgotten all that I had learnt there. But, after attending classes at the centre for 15-20 days, I felt confident enough to return to school. I appeared for the annual examination in March this year and was promoted to Class nine,” said Gupta of Dhungiaput village.

According to Parshuram Pradhan, a social worker who has worked for development in Malkangiri, “Many of these migrant children did not get admission in schools as they did not have documents like birth certificates and ration cards. The Gaon Mitras helped them get their documents, and ensured the



Educators were selected from the respective communities and designated as Gaon Mitras, meaning friends of the village, to visit rural households and encourage children to get back to studying.

children were enrolled in schools.”

Malkangiri in Odisha is one of the educationally backward districts having a literacy rate of less than 50 per cent against the state rate of 72.87 per cent, as recorded in the Census 2011. The COVID pandemic made it worse for the families of migrant workers as their children fell through the cracks and were finding it difficult to come back to the education stream.

When lockdown was imposed, Gopal Khudupia was studying in class two. But, when the schools reopened, he did not return. “My husband is a seasonal migrant labourer and a small-holder farmer. I barter vegetables for rice, pulses and other necessary items door to door. Gopal helps both of us at work, and spends the rest of his time roaming around and playing with village boys,” Chanchala Sagaria, Gopal’s mother, said.

But the efforts of Gaon Mitra Surendra

Khudupia who is from Patraput village, saw Gopal returning to education. “Now Gopal never misses his school,” she smiled.

The community-managed learning centres in the interiors of the Malkangiri district have helped. “These centres were in line with the National Education Policy-2020 that proposes the states to bring in alternative and innovative education centres with civil society partnership to bring back the dropout children into mainstream education,” said Basanta Kumar Nayak, a Bhubaneswar-based policy and budget analyst.

According to Debeet Beura, a volunteer, who advocates with the Mathili block administration for educational upliftment of tribal communities. “The learning centres gave these children the push to return them to studies, the remedial classes made them relearn the forgotten lessons and the end result that they were now confident to attend regular classes in schools.” □

STORY 34

Big lessons from small beginnings

Urfana Amin Moharken uses waste materials, such as cardboard boxes, plastic bottles, and old newspapers, as teaching aids for mathematics and science. She has also developed a joyful learning curriculum for Early Childhood Care and Education.



PHOTOS: FAHIM MATTOO

FAHIM MATTOO
SRINAGAR, J&K

A GOVERNMENT SCHOOL TEACHER in Srinagar in Jammu & Kashmir, Urfana Amin Moharken is proving that learning can be both affordable and sustainable. The 50-year-old teacher of the Government

Higher Secondary School, who teaches classes 11 and 12, has introduced an initiative called “Learn Big From Small”, where she uses waste as a teaching aid.

“When I started teaching here in April 2022, I realised that education was inaccessible for many students. It didn’t sit well with me. I wanted to create a teaching method



Urfana Amin Moharken uses discarded cardboard boxes, plastic bottles, and old newspapers to create models and diagrams that help students visualise and understand complex scientific and mathematical concepts.

that was for everyone, regardless of their background or resources,” Moharken said.

Moharken uses discarded cardboard boxes, plastic bottles, and old newspapers to create models and diagrams that help students visualise and understand complex scientific and mathematical concepts. She encourages her students to make models of everything from the solar system to the human organs with waste material that is readily available to them.

For example, she makes her students read the print on the discarded food packets and cartons to find out what ingredients were used to make that particular food product and what the nutrition values are. She then teaches them what should ideally be the intake of several nutrients. This also serves the purpose of drawing the attention of the students to how harmful to health packaged junk foods can be.

“Ma’am takes the time to understand

each of her students and she does this through a variety of activities like assignments, programmes, and online exams and quizzes,” Aasil Bakshi, a 11th grade student said.

“Ma’am’s ultimate goal is to also prepare us for life beyond the classroom. She believes that education is not just about learning facts and figures, but also about developing essential life skills like confidence, communication, and social awareness,” the student added.

In 2012, Moharken was the Programme Officer for the state in the directorate of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. She trained teachers in pedagogy, teaching special needs children and early childhood care and education. She also worked as a resource person at DIET. She was coordinator, Cultural Education wing of the Directorate of School Education Kashmir till April 2022, after which she came to the present school.

In her years of working in government schools, Moharken noticed that the schools she had worked in usually lacked adequate resources to teach complex concepts, and that textbooks were too expensive. She knew that she had to come up with a solution to this problem, and that's when she hit upon the idea of using waste material to create teaching aids.

For 12th grader Kasim Hussain Bhat, the “Learn Big from Small” has been a life-saver. “It has completely transformed my learning experience. Using waste as a tool to understand complex concepts in Mathematics and Science has made it so much easier for me to grasp difficult concepts. I never realised that waste could be such an effective tool,” Bhatt exclaimed.

Moharken's initiative has not gone unnoticed. She has been recognized by the government and several NGOs for her innovative teaching approach, and has been invited to share her experience with other teachers and educators across the country.

“Her student-centric approach to education encourages interactive learning and fosters a deeper understanding of the subject matter,” Rubeena Fazili, the Head of Department of District Institute of Educational Training (DIET), said. Moharken's ideas and training methods can easily be implemented by other teachers as well, and these are bound to have a positive impact on the education in the state, Fazili added.

In 2007-2008, Moharken developed a

Moharken's initiative has not gone unnoticed. She has been recognised by the government and several NGOs for her innovative teaching approach, and has been invited to share her experience with other teachers and educators across the country.

joyful learning curriculum for Early Childhood Care and Education, which was implemented by the State Institute of Education (SIE). The curriculum emphasises the importance of creating a positive and engaging learning environment to promote learning among young children.

The SIE recognised the value of this approach and adopted it as a standard for early childhood education. The Joyful Learning Curriculum has provided a framework for teachers to create engaging and effective learning experiences for their students.

Moharken's contributions to education have been acknowledged with numerous awards, including a gold medal for teaching science at the primary level by the National Council of Teacher Scientist in 2020. In 2023, she was awarded the Savitribai Phule award for her outstanding contribution to education. ■

STORY 35

Of smart classrooms, news corner and judo medals

From being a poorly attended school with just 44 children in 2016, the government primary school in Bhagesar village in Mirzapur district has emerged as a centre of excellence not just in academics but also sports.

BRIJENDRA DUBEY

MIRZAPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

KALPANA CHAWLA, SACHIN Tendulkar, Mother Teresa and Bhagat Singh are now familiar names amongst the tribal children of Bhagesar village. Their student groups in the Government Primary School, in Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh, are named after these personalities, an idea of their principal Ravikant Dwivedi.

Dwivedi and his team have also devised novel ways to make the students more responsible.

“We have devised a new way to make the classroom work more efficiently. We divide the classes into groups and each group has a leader and an assistant leader, both students, who coordinate with the teachers,” Dwivedi said “The leaders let the teachers know if any child is absent in their group after which the teacher calls up the home of the absentee and finds out why. This has led to a significant decrease in absenteeism in our



PHOTOS: BRIJENDRA DUBEY

The most attractive corner of the village school is the ‘news corner’ where newspapers are displayed and the children read them regularly.

school,” the principal explained.

The school puts technology to good use in its classrooms. Five out of the eight classrooms are smart classrooms with projectors, LED screens and computers.

Besides academics, the school has a student parliament, an active cricket team and a prize-winning judo and taekwondo team. The school won a bronze medal in the recently held state level Judo compe-



Ravikant Dwivedi, the teacher at Bhagesar Primary School has worked to tackle low absenteeism in the school.

tition in March 2023, said the principal.

The bronze medal in Judo was won by 11-year-old student Shivaji Prajapati. “I participated in the state level Judo competition held at Lucknow. I won the first round effortlessly, but in the final round, I could not win,” Prajapati said.

Things now are very different from when Dwivedi was appointed as a teacher at the school. “I came to this primary school in October 2016 and was saddened to see only 20 children out of the 44 students enrolled from classes one to five, coming to class. I decided I had to do something to change that,” he recalled.

“I visited the parents of the students, brought the matter of low attendance to the attention of the gram pradhan and discussed the problem at length with the school management committee. It took us [six teachers of the school] two months before we could start bringing about the transformation,” he added.

Operation Kayakalp, started by the state government in 2019, helped transform the school into a centre of excellence.

“We wanted to make our school a centre of excellence. Today, from the straggling 44 students in 2016, we have 218 studying in the school and 95 per cent of them attend school regularly,” said Dwivedi. The teachers at school use TLMs (Teaching Learning Materials) to impart learning effectively. The school has a library too.

The most attractive corner of the village school is the ‘news corner’ where newspapers are displayed and the children read them regularly.

The 35-year-old teacher won the Uttar Pradesh State Teacher Award, 2022. His school, the government primary school at Bhagesar village, has been declared a school of excellence in 2018, and was selected for the Information and Communication Technology award in education in 2020 and again in 2021. □

STORY 36

A cycle of change

Students and teachers of a government school in Varanasi district create a cycle out of plastic waste, rubber tubes and scrap metal to welcome the G20 delegates.



PAVAN KUMAR MAURYA

PAVAN KUMAR MAURYA
VARANASI, UTTAR PRADESH

AS VARANASI GOT ready to host the four-day G20 summit in August 2023, there was a buzz in the ancient city, which is also Prime Minister Narendra Modi's constituency.

The theme of this year's G20 Summit in India was Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam or One Earth, One Family, One Future. And, people from across the ancient city of

Varanasi were involved in beautifying her for the occasion.

The students and teachers of the Kharavan English School decided to make a flower pot holder in the shape of a cycle. The cycle is made entirely out of discarded plastic waste, rubber tubes and thrown-away metal bits. The cycle is 5.5 feet long, 3.5 feet high and weighs 42 kgs.

This was to spread the message to the

world at large. “Pollution has become such a challenge to the planet. The cycle that the children made is to make people aware of this. Even for short distances people jump into their diesel-petrol vehicles that add to pollution. Why not use the cycle? It is an affordable mode of transport and good for our wellness too,” Ajay Kumar Gupta, a teacher from Kharavan School said.

The expenditure of making this cycle was only Rs 500, that too only to buy the paints, he added. The scrap for making the cycle was bought from a scrap dealer. The children purchased two old car tyres, a couple of indicators, handles, wires, some metal pipes, chain and sprocket, and broken pedals, the teacher said.

“We had a lot of fun making the colourful cycle potholder,” said Nitin of class five who was involved in the project. “We have learnt how to convert scrap into so many useful and decorative items,” he said.

“Some of these models the students prepare would be displayed at several locations and public squares in the city,” said Sandeep Srivastav, Public Relations Office (PRO) of the Municipal Council. This would raise awareness about the importance of protecting the environment.

“We hope this will encourage the people of Varanasi to keep their surroundings neat, clean and hygienic. The students of the schools have a big role to play,” the PRO said.

“In a meeting with the district level education department it was decided that schools would be invited to present projects by their students on the theme of G20,” teacher Ajay Kumar Gupta said.

There will be an inter school competition where students will make something useful out of scrap, he added. The competition for making models out of waste materials will be at three levels – school, block and district level. There will be a first prize of Rs 50,000, the second prize of Rs 30,000 and a third prize of Rs 20,000.

There are about 250 government schools in the district and many of them are participating in this competition. They are making toys, pen stands, pot holders and so on with waste materials.

The primary school at Gajapur is busy making models of buses, trucks, model television sets and bags, while the students of Chiraigaon in Barthrakala primary school are creating flowerpots made out of discarded tins. Robots, telephone booths, models of volcanoes, etc, are what the students of Dharsauna Primary School in Cholapur Block are making.

Meanwhile, there are three eco-teams in Kharavan English School with 20 students in each team. They look after the school campus, tend to the gardens there and write regular reports about the progress of their activities, besides being involved in the waste-to-wealth project where they made the cycle. ■

STORY 37

From Mini-Chambal to a centre of learning

A madarsa in Barabanki in Uttar Pradesh provides modern education along with a thrust on age-old wisdom. Its founders want its students to be prepared for both the spiritual realm and the temporal world.



VIRENDRA SINGH

BARABANKI, UTTAR PRADESH

IN THE 1980s, Lachchipur ward, in Belhara town panchayat, Barabanki district was infamously known as 'mini Chambal'. There were nefarious activi-

ties afoot, and the police were often there conducting raids.

"This had an adverse impact on the lives of the 300 odd families that lived here, especially the children," Nurul Hasan, an inhabitant of Lachipur, remembered. So,

Hasan decided that he would do something about this and he put up a temporary shelter in front of his house and started teaching children.

In 1985, there were just four children who came to him to study. Today there are nearly 400 children, aged between four and 13-years of age, who study at the Madrasa, the 65-year-old said proudly.

But, it was a difficult journey, getting here, Hasan said. “It took a lot of persuasion to get the parents of other children to join in, but gradually the numbers increased. I needed more teachers to help me out. But I had no money, so I sold four bighas of land, to manage,” Hasan said. Currently he has three other teachers assisting him.

Along with Urdu, Persian and verses from the Koran, Hasan also instructed the students in English, Hindi, Mathematics and Science. “People objected to other subjects being taught at the madarsa, but I did not budge from my intentions. Students who graduated from the madarsa have not only grown up to become theologians but are also excelling in fields like healthcare, engineering, and academics,” he said.

Mehek Khan, a student in the madarsa stated that studying science, mathematics and English is beneficial for the students.

“Studying these subjects ensures that we are equipped to join professional courses in the future,” she said.

“We try to humanise our students. We don’t want western education to corrupt young minds and we focus on inculcating values that ensure empathy”

ZIA-UL-HASAN
PRINCIPAL OF THE MADARSA

For Saiyyama, a student of class eight studying these subjects would open doors for her at any institution she wanted. “I want to become a teacher. Here, we not only learn religious knowledge but also practical subjects which help us grow up to become suitable for employment,” she said.

Zia-ul-Hasan, the principal of the madarsa stated that he aims at developing both skills and values in his students. “We try to humanise our students. We don’t want western education to corrupt young minds and we focus on inculcating values that ensure empathy. We want our students to grow up to become not just consumers in a society but also its vital contributors,” the principal added.

“There was a time when scholars from across the world flocked to India to learn. We want our country to regain that reputation in the world,” he said. □

STORY 38

Learning with the puppets

At a village primary school in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh, teacher Vimalwani Dubey ropes in puppets to keep her students engaged and entertained.



SATISH MALVIYA

ALL EYES ARE trained on the teacher's table where there is a small model of a stage. The students wait with bated breath in a classroom at the primary school in Daulatpur village of Mandsaur district in Madhya Pradesh. Their teacher Vimalwani Dubey soon starts the puppet show and children clap loudly.

Dubey is a government teacher and has been teaching since 1998. Two years ago, she was transferred to the Daulatpur Government Primary School and her students now look forward to coming to school because the 51-year-old teacher uses fun methods to drive the lesson home. She also has a YouTube channel.

"I attended the training organised by the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training

for 15 days at Udaipur. It was there that we learnt how to use puppets to keep young children engaged in learning,” the 51-year-old teacher said.

Dubey learnt how to make four different kinds of puppets at the workshop. “There were rod puppets, finger puppets, glove puppets, and shadow puppets. I use a lot of the first three kinds and the children just love it. All these puppets are made from materials that cost nothing,” she said.

“We learn about numbers, environment, science and many other subjects, using the puppets. Children pay more attention and retain what the puppets tell them,” Dubey smiled.

Abid Khan, whose daughter Hamsheera is a student in the class of Dubey, couldn't agree more. “I have three children of which just one studies in Miss Dubey's class. When she comes home and repeats what she learnt at school that day, we can clearly see the difference when we compare her manner of speaking and explaining with that of my other two children who go to another school,” Abid Khan who is a daily wage labourer, said.

Banshilal Chauhan, an official at the education department's Block Resource Centre, was all praises too. “Miss Dubey uses innovative techniques to improve the children's grasping abilities. Other teachers in the department are also learning from her and adopting her methods of teaching,” he said.

“Miss Dubey uses innovative techniques to improve the children's grasping abilities. Other teachers in the department are also learning from her and adopting her methods of teaching”

BANSHILAL CHAUHAN

BLOCK RESOURCE CENTRE, EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

The 51-year-old teacher said she was proud to be a government teacher. “It is a matter of great pride to me that I am a government school teacher and am getting an opportunity to teach children who come from underprivileged homes,” she said.

“I have always worked in rural areas as a teacher. From 1998 to 2008, I was at Sitamau village. In 2008 when I came to the primary school in Bhalaur, I was fortunate to attend a training workshop organised by the state government on how to make classroom teaching entertaining and at the same time informative,” she recalled. ■

STORY 39

Lessons set in music

A young assistant teacher at a school in Raebareli, Uttar Pradesh, has brought dance, music and drama into his classroom and his students are loving it.



SUMIT YADAV

SUMIT YADAV

RAEBARELI, UTTAR PRADESH

RAVI PRATAP SINGH, an assistant teacher at the Sarai Manik Prathamik Vidyalaya in Sarai Manik village, Raebareli, Uttar Pradesh, decided to do something that would have his students raring to come to school.

In 2021, when the 26-year-old teacher joined the school, he found that the attendance was low and the environment dull

and uninspiring.

Along with the other teachers at school, Ravi Pratap Singh devised a plan. With the children who did show up, the teachers began to make mud toys, and every now and then, in between the book-learning, broke into song and dance, poetry and drama.

The word spread and more and more children began to trickle in. "Kids who rarely stepped into school now began to attend

classes and stay right through the day,” laughed Singh.

There were 146 children enrolled in the school when the assistant teacher joined in 2021. Today the enrollment has gone up to approximately 220, from classes one to five. There are four classrooms and four teachers in the school.

A graduate of the Allahabad University, Ravi Pratap Singh did a Basic Training Course from the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) in Raebareli. He also earned a degree in music from the Prayagraj Sangeet Samiti.

One of the most beloved activities of the students is kathak, a dance form that Singh introduced.

“We wanted to introduce the children to the traditional Indian dance form. It will connect them to our culture and it is also something they can take up as a profession later in life,” the assistant teacher said. There are nearly 40 students from classes three upwards, who learn kathak at the school.

“Our aim is to keep the children guessing and wondering what awaits them in school the following day. If we can do that, all reluctance to attend school will be banished,” Singh said.

He makes it a point to tell his students the history or cultural significance of every festival or special day, and he does this through stories, music, drama and dance.

“We had not even heard of kathak, when it was first introduced in our school. But now, we love it and have learnt so many different taals”

KAJAL DEVI,
A NINE-YEAR-OLD STUDENT

“Sir makes us enact every lesson or teaches us with the help of songs and dance. We can never forget the lessons we have learnt that way,” said Ravi Kishen, a 10-year-old student.

“We had not even heard of kathak, when it was first introduced in our school. But now, we love it and have learnt so many different taals,” Kajal Devi, a nine-year-old student of class four, said. “Along with kathak, Ravi Sir also teaches us poetry and tells us stories. We are no longer reluctant about coming to school,” she said.

“There has been a sea change in the school in the last couple of years. Ever since we introduced music and dance, children have been more regular,” said Sunita Devi, the principal of the school.

Parents are happy too. “It is reassuring how much care the school takes of our children. If for some reason my children do not attend school, we get a call from there or Ravi Sir himself comes home to find out what happened,” said Neetu Devi, a parent. □

STORY 40

A teacher in Kashmir creates a wealth of memories from waste

Roohi Sultana, a national award-winning art and craft teacher in a government school in Srinagar has won appreciation of parents for her method of teaching that requires minimal expenditure and offers maximum fun.



PHOTOS: SADAF SHABIR

SADAF SHABIR
SRINAGAR, J&K

THE CLASSROOM IS a buzz of activity. It is part of a two-storeyed heritage building, once the home of former chief minister, Sheikh Abdullah. One room has been converted

into a school where 25 students along with three teachers and one helper, sit learning and teaching. This is part of the Government Middle School, Tailbal in Srinagar.

Roohi Sultana is usually to be found sitting on the floor, surrounded by her students. Two wooden windows let the light in and



Sultana uses innovative teaching techniques, including using waste materials, to engage her students.

the walls are covered in charts and a bird-house hangs from the ceiling. There are windchimes made by the students with the help of Sultana and there is an explosion of colour everywhere.

Sultana is a National Award Winning teacher from Tailbal and she teaches art, craft and communication skills to students from Kindergarten to Class Five.

There is a constant stream of kids handing the 51-year-old teacher discarded bottle caps, small cartons and scraps of shiny paper for her to work her magic and make something fun for them. Even fruit peels and seeds are put to good use.

“One day, Roohi ma’am asked us to draw a rainy day, but instead of raindrops, she asked us to use orange seeds. We were amazed to see how she turned something seemingly useless into something beautiful,” Basharat, a class five student, said. “Now whenever I find something of no use at home, I collect it and give it to Roohi Ma’am because she can create amazing things out of them,” she added.

“Roohi Ma’am asked us to call each other by the name of a fruit, and for that day, I was called Tomato,” giggled Basit, a class two student, who till then found it difficult to learn the name of fruits. But not any more.

“Later, she used the same activity to teach us the names of colours and days of the week, and it became so much easier to understand. Roohi ma’am makes learning so much fun,” Basit said.

Sultana wants to become that person for students, who make learning fun. “They are the future, and I believe if they are happy they can learn things faster and can remember them for a lifetime. I hope they will remember me and my efforts in their journey,” she smiled.

For Sultana, this method of teaching using discarded materials places no burden on the parents, many of whom struggle financially. “I teach children through things I make out of waste. Many of them cannot afford to buy things for school activities,” the teacher said. So, there are face masks for the children made with disposable plates, and corn husks are converted into wall hangings.

Children, with their tongues sticking out in concentration, paint faces on mango seeds. These activities, Sultana said, were good for motor skills. “I remember giving needles and threads to children to make necklaces out of beads and realised one of them was having a problem with the task. It turned out the child’s vision was weak, and I alerted her parents about it,” the teacher said.

Sultana’s approach to education has earned her several awards, including the Best Teacher National Award in 2020, the

“One day, Roohi ma’am asked us to draw a rainy day, but instead of raindrops, she asked us to use orange seeds. We were amazed to see how she turned something seemingly useless into something beautiful”

BASHARAT
CLASS FIVE STUDENT

National Award in Zero Investment in Education Award 2019, and the Mirchi Powered Women Award for Path Breaking Work in the Field of Education in 2021. She was also awarded the Women Achievers Award on International Women’s Day, in 2022.

Shaheen, a mother of two children, one who is in Kindergarten and the other in Class two in the school was all praises. “My children are enjoying school and are studying well. Everything is free for them from school uniforms and books to mid-day meals. We don’t have to spend a single penny on their education,” she said. □

STORY 41

A teacher drives change in the village by roping in mothers

The teacher of a primary government school in Dhanras village in Chhattisgarh has organised tailoring classes for the mothers of her students to empower them.



PHOTOS: DEEPTI DIXIT

GAON CONNECTION

DEEPTI DIXIT NOT just teaches her students, but also ropes in their mothers to enhance their own lives. The teacher at the Shaskiya Prathamikshala, a government primary school in Dhanras village in Kota block in Bilaspur,

Chhattisgarh, is full of innovative ideas to keep her children engaged.

The school is made up primarily of children from the tribal and Other Backward Caste (OBC) communities. Besides the routine curriculum teaching, Dixit teaches the children in middle school needlework, has set



Sri Aurobindo Society, New Delhi, gave an award – Shiksha me Shoonya Nivesh Navachar – to Deepti Dixit for her community cooperation initiatives in the field of education, in 2018.

up a *muskaan pustakalay* (library), a toy corner, and has an LED TV in the classroom. She makes good use of the television to teach the children poems, letters of the alphabet, mathematics and science.

The 36-year-old teacher handles 90 children, from classes 1 to 5 at the village school. She said she had to multitask, ensure she spent enough time with each class and try to keep the students engaged in learning.

Dixit realised that mobilising the community would go a long way in energising the

school. “When I stepped out to ask for contributions, I realised people are ready to help if one is able to pitch them an idea. My motive was to have a continuous small contribution rather than a one-time big amount,” she explained. Her first donation was received from a friend who contributed Rs 1,000.

Dixit then looked for women clusters in Dhanras. “I met the women at the panchayat office when they came there to collect their rations, and asked them if they would like to be trained in tailoring. It was easy because these are the women

of my own village,” she explained.

The idea was to provide the women (most of them mothers of children at the school) *silayi prasikshan* (training in sewing) at the school, and at the same time keep them abreast of their children’s progress.

The women who attended the four-month free course, with two hours of training every day, between 2 pm and 4 pm, were encouraged to discuss their children’s performance and how they could be helped to improve.

Ram Chand Virwani, a 71-year-old retired director from the Rajya Sabha, based in New Delhi, provided four sewing machines to the school as well as the monthly salary of the trainer who would teach them sewing and tailoring.

“I wanted to do something for the women of the society but most entrepreneurship-related ideas like making pickles, papad etc, needed marketing. To overcome that challenge, I thought of training in tailoring which can help rural women to earn their livelihood,” he said. Virwani has also recently volunteered to pay for a computer-trainer for the school.

Sonakshi Yadav, a resident of Dhanras who already knew tailoring was roped in to be the trainer. She now earns Rs 3,000 a month through her tailoring business and an additional Rs 2,000 per month by teaching 20 other women tailoring. These women are expected to start their own

Ram Chand Virwani, a 71-year-old retired director from the Rajya Sabha, based in New Delhi, provided four sewing machines to the school as well as the monthly salary of the trainer who would teach them sewing and tailoring.

tailoring business.

“I made extra money after I joined and I love coming here to engage with the other women, and keep in touch with how my two sons are performing at school,” Yadav said. The extra money she makes she uses to improve the lives of her two sons, Ayush and Piyush, who study in class three and five respectively.

Dixit had included the community in her plans and aspirations and that has helped move forward. “My aspiration is to include as many people as possible to join this journey. And, I want my school to have the amenities of a private school,” she said. □

STORY 42

Artificial Intelligence lends a helping hand to a government school teacher

Students of a government primary school in Hardoi, Uttar Pradesh, are loving how cartoons speaking in their teacher's voice teach them lessons in mathematics and Hindi.



PHOTOS: SHIVENDRA SINGH BAGHEL

GAON CONNECTION

STUDENTS OF THE Faizullapur Primary School in Faizullapur village, in Hardoi District, Uttar Pradesh can often be heard giggling as cartoons on the television screen in their classroom speak to them in their teacher's voice.

Their teacher, Shivendra Singh Baghel, a primary school teacher, uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) to spice up his classes. The 31-year-old is convinced that this is going to be a game changer for his students in classes one to five.

"Technology has always played an impor-



Using the audio software Animate, Baghel has created five characters that serve as instructors for the classes.

tant role in education but the current use of it as Artificial Intelligence will be beneficial,” he said. Baghel came to this school in July 2022.

The school has 44 students spread out in three classrooms with another teacher besides Baghel. The two of them share the teaching duties at the primary school.

During the summer vacations this year, Baghel watched some videos on how AI could be used in teaching, and he went on to make a few videos himself. “I make two to three videos per day. I am currently working on the Hindi and Maths syllabus by including numbers, alphabets, names of fruits, colours and poems,” he explained.

With the help of the audio software

Animate, he creates different backgrounds and records his voiceover for the topics he has to teach. He has created five characters with the software who teach the classes.

The characters are Ticky for class one, Uncle Chill for class two, Ninja for class three, Oscar for class four and Mike for class five.

The children love the idea of these cartoon characters speaking to them in the voice of their teacher. “I hope to enhance the learning experience of the students. Artificial Intelligence can be used in so many different ways and it has certainly created a positive learning environment for my students and improved the effectiveness of my instruction,” Baghel said. □

STORY 43

Smart Classes appeal to first generation learners from tribal families

A headmaster at a government school in the tribal dominated Kakrad village in Uttar Pradesh, is making some smart changes in teaching methods that have transformed the learning environment.

BRIJENDRA DUBEY

MIRZAPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

THE COMPOSITE VIDYALAYA in Kakrad village is in the tribal dominated Patehra Block in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, about 35 kilometres from the district headquarters.

Till 2007, the school which has classes from one to eight was in a sorry state of disrepair. There were no proper classes, the children ran wild and the building itself was dilapidated.

But Rajendra Singh who took over the school as the headmaster in April 2007, set into place systems and teaching methods that signalled the start of the transformation of the school. The school today is a far cry from what it was.

The classrooms are impeccable, there are clean bathrooms and a grand dining hall for the students. The students in the



The classrooms are impeccable, there are clean bathrooms and a grand dining hall for the students. The students in the school are taught in both English and Hindi. PHOTOS: BRIJENDRA DUBEY

school are taught in both English and Hindi.

“When I arrived here in 2007, there were only 77 children in this school. Today there are 226 in middle school and 271 in the primary section,” 53-year-old Rajendra Singh said.

“There are a lot of challenges in this tribal dominated area. One of the biggest is that the parents of the children are not aware about the importance of sending their children to school regularly,” the headmaster said.

But now, things are improving with the school inviting the parents for regular parent teacher meetings.

“Many of the parents have not been to school at all or at best have studied only till the eighth or so,” Rajendra Singh said. “We have to go to the homes of the children to fetch them to school. Sometimes they are out in the fields helping out their parents. But, we have tried to make the school as attractive as possible to motivate them to come to school more regularly,” he said.

“The classrooms are tiled, the walls are covered in paintings and there are fans to keep the students cool in the summer months. With help of the state government we have now got benches for the children to sit on,” he added.

The school has plenty of indoor games, has a library and the children are encouraged to play as well as learn. The state government made this an English Medium school in 2019. The school was given a projector so that teachers could use it as a teaching aid.

“We take the help of cartoons and other video clippings to explain complicated concepts, etc, to the children,” Rajendra



The state government made this an English Medium school in 2019. The school was given a projector so that teachers could use it as a teaching aid.

Singh said. The school has four government teachers, two shiksha mitra who assist the teachers, and one Anudeshak who takes care of the extra curricular activities in the school, such as art, computers, physical training and so on.

“When the teacher explains we do understand what is being taught, but when we watch films on a subject we are learning, we can rewind, pause, etc., till such time we have thoroughly got what is being taught,” said Anshu Shukla, a class eight student of the school. Even if for some reason the teacher cannot be present, we study on our own in these smart classes, she added. □

STORY 44

A cool school in the Thar desert

Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls High School in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan provides free education and healthy meals to rural girls all in a beautiful building built with traditional wisdom.



PHOTOS: KULDEEP CHHANGANI

KULDEEP CHHANGANI
KANOI (JAISALMER), RAJASTHAN

AN OVAL-SHAPED BUILDING in the Thar desert, in a village called Kanoi, 37 kilometres away from Jaisalmer city in Rajasthan, is garnering a lot of attention from tourists. Because it is

where 140 girls from the neighbouring villages that have a low literacy rate are provided education.

But that is not the only thing special about Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls High School. The school building is designed in such a way that it is said to withstand temperatures up



The school is meant for only girl students who come from villages such as Sam, Salkha, Bhilon ki Basti, Meghwalon ki Basti, in Jaisalmer district.

to 50 degrees Celsius. It is built with locally sourced sandstone by local masons and carpenters. Traditional building wisdom keeps the school interiors cool.

The girls studying at the ‘cool’ school come mostly from families where their parents are farmers, camel herders, goat herders and casual labourers.

The Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls High School was conceptualised by Michael Daube, founder of an American non-profit CITTA, that provides women and girls from marginalised communities education and means of economic independence.

The school was designed by American architect, Diana Kellog, and began func-

tioning in July 2021. CITTA funds the running of the school which is absolutely free for the students who are also given free books, uniform and transport, besides food.

“The walls of the school had to withstand considerable heat and keep the interiors cool. That is the reason we used the local sandstone and then lime to plaster the walls. These are traditional methods that have been used in this area for hundreds of years. Both these keep the inside of the building cool,” said Riya Bissa, an assistant architect in the project.

It was a conscious decision to use local building materials and local artisans to minimise the carbon footprint, Bissa said. “We kept the geographic, cultural and tradi-



The Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls High School was conceptualised by Michael Daube, founder of an American non-profit CITTA.

tional aspects of Jaisalmer while we built the school.”

Solar panels generate the required power supply and an efficient rainwater harvesting system has been put in place that collects runoff from the roof and leads it into a tank through pipes. Outside each classroom are planted saplings of the local flora, and they are etched on the sandstone walls as well.

The school is meant for only girl students who come from villages such as Sam, Salkha, Bhillon ki Basti, Meghwalon ki Basti, in Jaisalmer district. “A school bus picks them up and brings them to school by 7.30 am and they return home at 1.30 pm. They get lunch at school,” said Gyanendra Mishra, the academic manager

of the school.

“In a desert area like this the literacy of women is abysmal. I am excited to be a part of an initiative to raise their education levels and make them count for something,” said Kowsiki, a 31-year-old English teacher from Delhi.

While the school can hold 400 students, on account of it still being a primary school the number of students is currently 140, said Mishra. There are six teachers at the moment, four of whom are women. There is also a supervisor besides the academic manager who administers the school. □

STORY 45

A screening success

Teachers at a village school in Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh make short movies based on lessons from the textbooks, starring their students and their guardians.



PHOTOS: VIRENDRA SINGH

VIRENDRA SINGH

MANGALPURVA (SITAPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

WHEN THE BLACKBOARD and chalk were not enough to keep children interested, teachers of a rural school decided to innovate and try something else to get them back into the classroom.

The teachers of the primary school in Mangalpurva village in Sitapur district, Uttar

Pradesh, began to make short movies with their students and their guardians acting in them. This sparked off a transformation like never before and now children and their parents from villages far and wide are clamouring to get admission in this school.

Admissions have gone up and the attendance that was a dismal 50 per cent has climbed to 90 per cent.

“When I joined this school in 2018, I

realised how poor admissions and the attendance was. Despite the best efforts of our teachers, children would not come regularly to school,” said Vivek Kumar, the headmaster of the school.

It was then that the teachers of the school hit upon the idea of making short films based on the inspiring stories in the textbooks of the students. “We decided to make a total of seven films. We thought this would be a great way to bond with our students and their parents,” he said.

Once a particular lesson is chosen to be made into a film, the teachers write out the dialogues, select the actors and start rehearsing with them. Once they have learnt up the lines, the shooting begins on smartphones.

The first movie they made was called Parakh and it had students and their parents acting in it. “We uploaded that on YouTube.”

“Acting, role playing and getting into the skins of the characters they played was a big hit. So far we have made two films, the second one being I Am Azad,” he said.

“Learning from the text books by rote and out of fear is not a permanent learning. Children forget what they have learnt,” said Prashanth Shukla, an assistant teacher at the school. But, he said, adopting the audio-visual approach to their lessons ensured the children remembered what they had listened to and acted out for a much longer time.



Captivating posters showcase collaborative short films created by teachers, students, and guardians of Mangalpurva village primary school.

This novel approach to education has shot up admissions in their school that has 160 students now, said Shukla.

Gangasagar, a 60-year-old guardian, said it was a novel experience acting in a movie. “I came to the school and the teachers explained what I had to do. I got ready and acted,” he laughed.

Fifty-year-old Yashodha said she had never bothered with visiting the school where her two daughters studied. “When they came home one day and asked me to act in a movie, I went and did it. I would love to take part in more such projects with the children,” she said.

Class five student Anmol said that acting in the movie I Am Azad, gave him such a thrill. He said, “When we get to live the lives of people we read about in our textbooks, it is a great feeling.” □



SECTION 4

LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND IS THE MOTTO OF SOME TEACHERS WHO WALK
AN EXTRA MILE TO HELP CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS SHINE

राजस्थान सरकार की आदर्श विद्यालय योजना के अन्तर्गत चयनित
राजकीय उच्च माध्यमिक विद्यालय गोलूवाला



STORY 46

He makes a place in the sun for children with intellectual disabilities

Dhananjay Kumar coaches children with limitations in cognitive functioning and skills to take part in national and international sporting events.

AMARPAL SINGH VERMA
HANUMANGARH, RAJASTHAN

DHARMENDRA BHATI DOES not speak much. But he does say that he participated in the national badminton championship held at Bokaro in Jharkhand.

Dharmendra is a class 10 student at

the Rajkiya Senior Secondary School at Goluwala village in Hanumangarh district, Rajasthan. And he had to work much harder than most to play in the tournament. The young teenager has Intellectual Disability, which means he has certain limitations in cognitive functioning and skills, including communication, social and self-care skills.

Dharmendra's coach, Dhananjay Kumar,



The 50-year-old special educator became the sports director of the Rajasthan chapter of Special Olympics, Bharat, in 1999, and, in 2021, he became area director of the Special Olympics.

couldn't be prouder when he said, "Dharmendra is a good player and he will win medals soon". Intellectual Disability is a condition and not a disease, he stated.

Dhananjay Kumar, a special educator at Rajkiya Senior Secondary School, coaches such students in athletics, cricket, volleyball, badminton, hockey, etc.

In 2021, he coached five young boys coming from different government schools in Rajasthan to participate in a National Handball tournament held at Sonapat in Haryana. Aged between 13 and 18, all of them had Intellectual Disability (ID).

"Children with ID struggle to communicate. For them just listening and grasping instructions can be difficult. The levels of ID differ from child to child," he said. He also coaches children from other private and government schools and non-profit institutions.

Dhananjay became the sports director of the Rajasthan chapter of Special Olympics, Bharat, in 1999, and, in 2021, he became area director of the Special Olympics. As sports director of the Rajasthan chapter of the Special Olympics, Bharat, Dhananjay encouraged and trained children with intellectual disability, and many of them participated in national and international sporting events, and won gold, silver and bronze medals.

For many parents, this special educator is a beacon of hope. "I constantly worry about my son Rajesh who struggles with learning and communication. But, Dhananjay Sir has ensured he reaches great heights," said Dhannaram Kumhar of Ladhuwala village in Sri Ganganagar district. Rajesh won a gold medal in athletics at the international games in China in 2007, when he was 18 years old.

Another Dhananjay protege, Aynu Sharma



Dhananjay encouraged and trained children with intellectual disability, and many of them went on to participate in national and international sporting events, and win gold, silver and bronze medals.

from Jaipur, held aloft a bronze and a silver medal that he won in 2019 at an international badminton championship held at Abu Dhabi. “Dhananjay Sir taught me to play badminton. I owe a lot to him,” said Aynu, who is 22 years old now.

Under his mentorship, nearly four dozen children have won several medals in national sporting events. “Those who won medals in international events – about eight of them – were also awarded handsome cash incentives,” said the coach.

Dhananjay brings vast experience to his work. In 2011, he officiated at the Special Olympics World Summer Games at Athens, Greece as an assistant coach in volleyball; in 2013, he coached people for the athletics event during the Special Olympics Asia Pacific Regional Games held at Newcastle, Australia; in 2017, he was commended by the Special Olympics

International for his commitment to the Special Olympics programme.

Dhananjay refuses to take credit for his work with the children. “Each of us comes with a pre-ordained role to play in the world. God has chosen me for this and so I do this work. I do not think I am doing anyone a favour,” he said.

Children with intellectual disability might have lower IQs, but if their skills are identified and they are trained in it, they are the same as other children, if not better, he said. “The need of the hour is not to be condescending with them but to find what they are good at and hone that so that they find a place in the sun,” Dhananjay pointed out. □

STORY 47

A wheelchair bound teacher is changing lives of children with special needs in Kashmir

Javeed Ahmad Tak has founded the Zaiba Aapa Institute of Inclusive Education in Bijbehara in Anantnag district of J&K for children with disabilities. The institute has 130 children with disabilities and 21 special educators.



MUDASSIR KULOO

THAT DAY IN 1997 was like any other for 23-year-old Javeed Ahmad Tak, a student of Anantnag Degree College in south Kashmir. He left home that morning to visit his uncle, but something happened that changed his life forever.

He was shot at by gunmen and the bullets

damaged his spine. Ever since, Tak has been wheelchair-bound.

That life-changing experience pushed Tak to complete his Masters in Social Work in 2006, and two years later, in 2008, he set up the Zaiba Aapa Institute of Inclusive Education in Bijbehara, in Anantnag district of Jammu & Kashmir, to educate children with disabilities.



In 1997, Javeed Ahmad Tak was shot by gunmen, causing spinal damage that has left him wheelchair-bound ever since.

Tak's institute, located about 50 kilometres from Srinagar in Kashmir, has 130 students, some of whom are in the autism spectrum, whereas others have disabilities such as hearing and visual impairment, and other physical challenges.

At Tak's school, 21 special educators give the children with disabilities (CWD) vocational and rehabilitation training, teach them Braille, and provide sports coaching.

Educators like these offer a ray of hope to millions of children who are bereft of education due to their disabilities – physical, cognitive, or mental.

It is estimated that 7.8 million children in

India under the age of 19 live with disabilities. Among five year olds with disabilities, three-fourths do not go to any educational institution. One-fourth of the CWD population aged between five and 19 years also do not go to school. These facts are documented in UNESCO's report titled *N for nose: state of the education report for India 2019; children with disabilities*.

The number of children with disabilities enrolled in school drops significantly with each successive level of schooling, points out the UNESCO report. There are fewer girls with disabilities in school than boys.

The proportion of children with disabilities who are out of school is much higher than

the overall proportion of out-of-school children at the national level.

Tak also runs a not-for-profit called Humanity Welfare Organization, that helps persons with disabilities. “We provide supportive devices like hearing aids, wheel chairs, crutches and sticks especially to school children,” he said. In 2020, Tak was awarded the Padma Shri for his social work.

For Afroza Jan, a resident of Bijbehara in Anantnag district in south Kashmir, the institute is a beacon of hope for her nine-year-old daughter Muntaha Fayaz. “When Muntaha was only 45 days old she fell severely ill and has been paralysed ever since, and unable to move or even feed herself,” said the mother.

“Two years ago we enrolled her in Zaiba Aapa Institute of Inclusive Education, and have seen a huge improvement in Muntaha. She now sits without support and can lift her arms. She is also trying to hold a pen and write,” she said emotionally.

Afroza Jan now dares to hope that her daughter will be able to go to school like other children. Every morning, after feeding Muntaha, Afroza carries her to the main road, which is a few hundred metres away from home. From there, a bus takes Muntaha to the institute where she undergoes physiotherapy.

The Zaiba Aapa Institute of Inclusive Education charges anything between Rs 50 and

**At Tak’s school,
21 special educators give the
children with disabilities (CWD)
vocational and rehabilitation
training, teach them Braille,
and provide sports
coaching.**

Rs 300 per month including the bus fare.

During the pandemic, Tak’s non-profit provided medicines and rations to people with disabilities and their families. “We ran primarily on public donations, but since 2018, Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives, based in Bengaluru, Karnataka, has financially supported the institute,” said Tak.

His institute provides training in Braille, and it was this that opened up possibilities for 20-year-old Dukroo Zakai. It was here that she received free education along with books in Braille. Zakai, who has been visually impaired since childhood, completed her education till the tenth standard at the institute and is today pursuing her graduation in New Delhi. □

STORY 48

Music to ears

Ramlal Jingar is visually challenged but he has not let that affect his efficiency as a teacher at the government school in Padru village in Barmer district, Rajasthan, where he teaches social science and music.



PHOTOS: SALIM ATTAR

SALIM ATTAR
BARMER, RAJASTHAN

EVERY MORNING, RAMLAL Jingar sets out from his home, a walking stick in one hand, holding his daughter's hand in the other, towards the school. The 35-year-old is a teacher at the government school, Balika Rajkiya Prathmik Vidyalaya in Padru gram

panchayat in Barmer district, Rajasthan.

An illness in childhood took away sight from both his eyes. Around the same time, when he was just five years old, his father, a daily wage labourer, passed away. His mother, Sundar Devi, brought up Ramlal and his four sisters single handedly.

It was his mother, a daily wage labourer,



Jingar's mother tried very hard to get him educated. She wanted him to have an education that could help him in the future. However, his blindness was a significant challenge.

who made it possible for him to come this far, said Jingar. She passed away in 2020, but not before she saw her son making something good of his life.

In 2008, Jingar appeared for the Rajasthan Public Service Commission (RPSC) exam and was selected in the category for the people with special needs. He started teaching at the government Senior Secondary School for Boys School in Padru. He taught there between 2008 and 2015, after which he shifted to the Government Balika Rajkiya Prathamik Vidyalaya.

Jingar teaches Social Science from classes eight to 10. "A student reads aloud from the textbook and I explain the lesson to the class. I give them the essence and synopsis of the lesson and we discuss it," the teacher said. He also uses braille textbooks to teach from.

Sandeep Mehra, principal of the school,

described Ramlal as being a committed and disciplined teacher. "He is also responsible for the sound of music you will always hear in our school," he said.

Music is close to the heart of Jingar. "I learnt to play the harmonium and dholak on my own and I became quite popular in Padru village and villages nearby. I am often invited to play the musical instruments during pujas and other functions," he smiled.

He also shares this love of his with his students. "I teach them music and often organise the morning prayers," said Jingar.

"Our Sir prepares us thoroughly for occasions like Independence Day and Republic Day, and encourages us to participate in various programmes," piped up Anita, a class seven student. "He is also a patient and kind teacher," added Neha Rathore of class five. ▣

STORY 49

Reading the signs

In West Bengal's tea belt, a hearing impaired teacher, Loknath Chhetri, teaches speech and hearing impaired children in remote villages at the Niswarth School for Deaf and Mute, in north Bengal.



ANURADHA SHARMA
SILIGURI, WEST BENGAL

LOKNATH CHHETRI TEACHES at a special school in Bagrakote Tea Estate, in the sub-Himalayan Dooars region, 50 km north-east of Siliguri in West Bengal. The 33-year-old teacher is speech and hearing impaired, and teaches

at the Niswarth School for Deaf and Mute, the first English-medium school for the deaf in the Dooars.

“Deaf people can do anything except hear,” he messaged on WhatsApp. “Deaf people can think and write, and gain knowledge, if they get an opportunity to do so,” he continued.



The Niswarth School for Deaf and Mute is the first English-medium school for the deaf in the Dooars and has 13 children, who mostly come from the tea garden workers' families.

But in the remote villages in the Dooars of north Bengal, parents don't know better and their deaf children remain uneducated, he rued.

The Niswarth School for Deaf and Mute, where Chhetri teaches, is in Bagrakote, one of the oldest tea estates in India set up in 1876. The school is the first English-medium school for the deaf in the Dooars and has 13 children in the age group of five to 18 years, who mostly come from the tea garden workers' families.

"My dream is to educate deaf and mute children. So, I have chosen to be a teacher and teach children like me," said Chhetri. He is also an activist working for the rights of deaf persons as the vice president of Jalpaiguri District Association of the Deaf.

"We want to make sign language the 23rd official language of India. It is time to educate people on the Indian sign

language," he said.

Born in Birpara in Alipurduar district of West Bengal, Chhetri has been deaf since birth. He studied at The Salvation Army Home and School for the Deaf in Darjeeling, over 150 km away from his home.

After matriculation in 2006, he went to CSI Higher Secondary School for the Deaf in Chennai where he finished his Class XII in Commerce. He came back home and acquired a graduate degree in commerce through distance education from the Indira Gandhi National Open University in 2016.

Apart from learning the Indian Sign Language, he also did a basic course on computers. In 2022, he obtained a Diploma in Education in Special Education (Hearing Impairment) from North Bengal Handicapped Rehabilitation Society.

Chhetri's mission of teaching hearing



It was a conscious decision to go for an English-medium school where children can learn computers and the Indian Sign Language, among other things.

and visually impaired children in Dooars would not have taken off without Harsh Kumar. In 2022, Kumar, a former manager of the Bagrakote Tea Estate, founded the Niswarth School for Deaf and Mute.

In 2006, a year after Harsh Kumar's wife suffered a stroke that left her with a speech impediment, they together founded a non-profit organisation called Niswarth to work in the area of hearing disability in the tea belt. Kumar's wife passed away in 2008, but he continued and has founded the school for speech and hearing impaired children.

"I wanted to do more," said Kumar. "Why should the deaf persons of our region be content with just getting by with their lives? Why can't they dream of something big?"

Why can't they get into IITs, become engineers?" he asked.

According to him, it was a conscious decision to go for an English-medium school where children can learn computers and the Indian Sign Language, among other things. "So that people with hearing disabilities are not limited to blue-collar jobs, and can aim for better-paying opportunities in this world of electronics and digital technology, which mostly runs on English language," said Kumar.

The knowledge of English and computers opens the doors to many professions. They don't have to limit themselves to semi-skilled, less-paying jobs, he pointed out. ▣

STORY 50

Kindling hope in children with special needs in Barmer

A rural school in Balotra, Rajasthan provides free education and vocational training to children with special needs to become self-reliant.



PHOTOS: SALIM ATTAR

SALIM ATTAR

BALOTRA (BARMER), RAJASTHAN

LIGHT STREAMS into the hall where children sit either writing numbers in the small squares in a notebook, drawing or working on puzzles. Colour pencils, toys, and charts on the walls create a bright happy space. Musical instruments line one side of the wall, and

durries are spread out in readiness for a yoga session.

Krishna, a little boy, wanders up and declares that he wants to become a *fauji* (soldier) when he grows up and will vanquish all his enemies. As if on cue, his friend Mela, breaks into a Bollywood song. “*Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani, phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*,” she lisps.



Sneh Manovikas Vidyalaya has become a haven for children with special needs and a beacon of hope for their parents.

Mela has cognitive disabilities and Krishna is visually impaired. Both study at Sneh Manovikas Vidyalaya, a school for children with special needs in Balotra village in Barmer district in Rajasthan. The large hall is their classroom.

The school was set up in 2019, as an offshoot of the Barmer-based non-profit, Savera Sansthan, founded by Satyanarayan Chaudhary in 2002. Chaudhary has been associated with social work in rural areas through his non-profit for years. He has done a lot of work related to well-being and mental health in Rajasthan.

“There are so many hundreds and thousands of children who are less than normal physically or mentally, and there is no organised set up that can help them. We are trying to bridge that gap,” said Satyanarayan Chaudhary, who is also manager of the school.

“There are people in rural Rajasthan who are deprived of even basic amenities. In

such poverty and struggle, if they have children with disabilities, they can do little about rehabilitating them, or even thinking about doing so,” he said.

The yawning gap in services related to children with special needs was the catalyst that created Sneh Manovikas Vidyalaya. “I conducted a survey and realised that there was nothing for these children. And, that is why I set up the school,” said Chaudhary.

Recalling the early days he said, “I went from village to village, telling people about this school and encouraging them to put their children with special needs there.”

Today, the school has 50 children enrolled in it. Their ages range between five years and 20 years. The establishment combines both education, and treatment for the children, many of whom have cerebral palsy, are visually or hearing impaired, or are in the Autism spectrum.

“The idea was to provide the best possible

treatment to children with special needs irrespective of their economic background,” said Chaudhary. The school charges no fees. Children are given free uniforms and are provided free transport to pick them up from home and drop them back. It runs on donations and the largess of industrialists from Balotra that is an industrial zone.

At the school, these children are trained in basic skills and abilities that will help them lead as normal a life as possible. Two teachers and two caretakers other than Chaudhary work with the children.

Roshni Thakur comes to the school with her daughter, Siddhi, who is on the autism spectrum. “If you look around, you will see that each child is doing something that is well within his or her capability. It is not like regular schools where each child has to do the same thing whether he is able to or not,” she pointed out.

“I have been coming here for four months now, and my daughter has shown considerable improvement,” said Thakur.

For Jitendra, a father of eight-year-old Kalpana, the school has reawakened hope in him. “My daughter is hearing impaired and couldn’t speak, read or write properly. But, after she has come here, she has improved tremendously. Today, Kalpana writes a lot more, communicates a lot better and is showing overall improvement,” he said.

The principal of the school, Sunil Prajapati,

Currently, the school enrolls 50 students aged 5 to 20. It offers education and treatment to children with conditions like cerebral palsy, visual or hearing impairment, and autism.

said that the children get speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy as well as sensory integration therapy. “Children who are visually impaired are trained in Braille. Those with physical limitations are provided therapy to improve their motor skills,” he explained.

The institution also provides vocational training to children in order to provide a future for them where they can be self-sufficient. “We want to extend these facilities to children in the rural areas of the district. They can come here and learn skills that will enable them to live independently in the future,” said Chaudhary.

In the process, the social worker said that the aim was also to break down prejudice in society about people with disabilities. ■

STORY 51

A visually impaired teacher illuminated the lives of children of tea-garden workers

Karna Telenga helped set up a school in a village in Sivasagar district of Assam bringing education to underprivileged children of tea garden workers there. Despite losing his vision in an accident, he continued to teach them.



PHOTOS: SAYANTANI DEB

A few days after Karna Telenga was interviewed for this story, he passed away in an accident on August 1, 2023. But this beloved teacher's legacy of love for his students continues to enlighten the children of tea garden workers at the Telenga Bosti Lower Primary School

SAYANTANI DEB
GUWAHATI, ASSAM

THE VOICES OF children loudly saying their multiplication tables, reciting a poem and spelling out words bounced off the walls of the Telenga Bosti LP School.



Being primarily a mathematics teacher, Telenga ensured that his students understood the subject properly.

Located in Sivasagar district of Assam, the school has about 40 students studying between classes 1 and class 5. Most of them come from the tea gardens and the adjoining slums in the area.

Karna Telenga, their teacher, spends hours telling them stories and educating them, and making them laugh. Being visually impaired hasn't hampered Telenga's love for teaching his students who come from underprivileged families of tea garden workers. Many of them are first generation learners.

"My life revolves around these students. I find the utmost peace being with these innocent souls," smiled 49-year-old Telenga.

Born into a family of tea-garden workers, and the oldest of four siblings, Telenga has known struggle and the importance of education. He dedicated his life to the school which was set up in 1992. Even though he lost his eyesight in an accident,

he did not stop teaching.

"The school is my happiest place. Besides, ours is a remote village without proper educational facilities. I do not want the children to be deprived of education," said the teacher.

Telenga started teaching when he was himself a student of class 11. "Soon after my 10th exams, I started working as a night chowkidar at a tea factory to help out my family," he recalled.

It was then that a resident of neighbouring Rupapur village, Lila Ram Kalita sought his help in setting up a school in their village. And, Telenga Bosti LP School was born, to bring literacy to the tea-worker community.

Just when things began to look up and the school started doing well, an accident left Telenga blind. The incident turned his life upside down. Nothing could be done to restore his vision.

But, that did not stop Telenga from continuing to teach.

“I had to only change the way I taught. Earlier, I used to write on the blackboard, and the children would follow it. But now, I make them learn things verbally,” he said.

According to him, the children had no trouble adapting to his new teaching method. “They are attentive and understand things without much trouble.”

Being primarily a mathematics teacher, Telenga ensured that his students understood the subject properly. He made them recite multiplication tables and solve mathematical problems. He also teaches them English and Assamese.

“The children love Telenga Sir dearly, and they never miss his class. His passion for teaching and students’ thirst for learning has turned this small school into a temple of knowledge,” Principal Kalita exclaimed.

The villagers look on Telenga as a vital force in the village. “He is well-respected and has always encouraged fellow villagers to understand the importance of education. He never misses an opportunity to tell parents about how important it was to educate their children,” Moni Telenga, a 32-year-old anganwadi worker from the village, recalled.

Telenga himself spared no efforts to educate his children. “My father’s life has taught us that if we genuinely want to do



Most of the students in the school come from the tea gardens and the adjoining slums in the area.

something then nothing can stop us,” said Aditya Telenga, his son and a B.Sc student at Moran College.

“My father faced inordinate challenges to provide me and my sister a good education,” Aditya added. His sister, Kirti Telenga, works as a nurse at a private hospital in Sivasagar.

Telenga was only 49 years old when he died recently in an accident on August 1. His colleagues mourn him and say he had so much more to give to the children. But, all those who knew him said they would ensure his legacy would live on.

“He led an exemplary life and has inspired us with his willpower and dedication. I promise to carry forward his legacy and provide the best education to the students,” said Kalita. □



SECTION 5

RURAL LIBRARIES

A LIBRARY MOVEMENT IS UNDERWAY IN INDIA WITH A NUMBER OF COMMUNITY LIBRARIES BEING SET UP IN VILLAGES TO SPREAD LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES.



STORY 52

PHOTOS: NIDHI JAMWAL

A million dreams are taking shape in Karnataka's rural libraries

As many as 5,573 village panchayat libraries have sprung up across Karnataka. These free libraries are opening the doors to a better life for young people from economically weaker backgrounds.

NIDHI JAMWAL
BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

SURROUNDED BY BOOKS and printed sheets of paper, Anjunay sat at a desk engrossed in the pages of a book. The youngest of three sons of a coolie in

Raichur district of Karnataka, Anjunay, who is in his 20s, moved to Bengaluru, to prepare for a competitive examination.

His friends told him about public libraries set up by local panchayats, where students not only got books to read but also received



Suvarna C is the librarian of Doddajala rural library for the past 15 years and by now she knows all the family members of students who come to the library.

free meals.

These libraries have sprung up across the state under a unique initiative of the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj. Official records say that 5,573 rural libraries are functional in 5,951 village panchayats of the state. Of them, 4,608 are digital libraries.

More than 3.5 million children are using these libraries and are registered with them. Belagavi has the highest number of rural libraries – 462 – followed by Tumkur district at 327.

Karnataka’s rural libraries have become the talk of the town not just within the state but also across the country. So much so that in her Budget 2023-24 speech earlier this year, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the setting up of a National Digital Library for children and adolescents. She added that the respective state governments will be encouraged to set up physical libraries “at the panchayat and ward levels

and provide infrastructure for accessing the National Digital Library resources.”

A large part of Anjunay’s day, sometimes even nights, are spent at the Rajankunte Gram Panchayat Digital Library and Competitive Examination Study Centre in Yelahanka taluka.

“This library is open 24x7 and I can use the computer and the internet for free too. There is a panchayat canteen from where students like me get two free meals a day. This library is a blessing,” said Anjunay.

Unlike his two older brothers, who are farm labourers, Anjunay, a mechanical engineering graduate, nurtures a dream to crack the Staff Selection Commission (SSC) examination of the central government.

“This rural library is a gateway to several opportunities. It can help me realise my dream of getting selected in the SSC exam and make my family proud,” said the young man.

Apart from a stock of 15,000 books, the Rajankunte digital library, which is housed on the top floor of the local panchayat building, has 15 internet-connected computers, an iPad and Alexa too, which can narrate lessons at a single voice command. A total of 2,225 people are enrolled at the library of which 1,700 are children between the age group of six and 18 years.

“This digital library is completely free for anyone below 14 years of age. Others have to pay a one-time membership fee ranging between Rs 50 and Rs 100,” said Nagaraju, the panchayat development officer with Rajankunte gram panchayat. “The Rs 50-100 is a lifetime membership fee and members can take up to three books home for 15 days,” he added.

About 16 kilometres away from the Rajankunte is another rural library in Doddajala village near the Bengaluru international airport.

Twelve-year-old Hitesh Gowda in fluent English said that he visited the Doddajala library five days a week. Apart from teaching younger students how to use drawing and painting applications on the computer, he enjoys playing board games and carrom that are available for free.

Suvarna C is the librarian of Doddajala rural library for the past 15 years and by now she knows the family members of students who come there. Community engagement through rural libraries is one of the aims of these centres.

Apart from a stock of 15,000 books, the Rajankunte digital library, which is housed on the top floor of the local panchayat building, has 15 internet-connected computers, an iPad and Alexa too.

“Apart from over 15,000 books, we get 10 newspapers daily. We have a separate computer section in the library. Every Saturday I hold classes where I teach children and their mothers to use computers,” she said. “We also have a weekly ‘Read Aloud’ session where kids read story books aloud. They can take a storybook home and read it with their mother,” the librarian added.

Doddajala library is open from ten in the morning till five in the evening. It is supported by the non-profit Shikshana Foundation. “We are working with over 1,400 libraries and regularly donate books and computer monitors. We have selected 35 villages to achieve 100 per cent literacy, and Doddajala village is one of them,” said Snetra of Shikshana Foundation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, these rural libraries helped bridge the digital divide between urban and rural children. “We kept our library open during the pandemic. Some children studied at the library while we also organised online classes,” said Suvarna, who earns a monthly salary of Rs 12,000. ■

STORY 53

The fondest corner of a government primary school

A teacher in Siktaur Primary School in Gorakhpur district, UP, cleared out a disused room and turned it into a library that has become the favourite hangout for the students.



AISWARYA TRIPATHI
SIKTAUR (GORAKHPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

THERE IS A clothesline in the white-washed room — a village school library — that has books instead of clothes held in place with clothespins. The walls are covered with colourful

drawings made by children.

There are always children to be found at the library at Siktaur Primary School in Khorabar block of Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh. They find themselves comfortable corners to sit in or sprawl on the durries with a book in hand.



The library at Siktaur Primary School in Khorabar block of Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh is hugely popular with its students.

The library is a far cry from what it originally was before January 2019. But Shweta Singh, a teacher, decided to clean it up and turn it into the first library this government primary school has ever had.

Singh's inspiration came from a workshop she attended in 2018, which was organised by Mission Shikshan Samvad, a non-government organisation working in the education sector. There, she learnt how to build a library by seeking book donations through Samoohik Sahbhagita or the community's help.

"I met a teacher from Meerut there, who had sought book donations on social media platforms for a library. I felt I could

do the same," said Singh.

The school teacher used the social media platform Facebook to make an appeal for books and very quickly gathered stacks of them. Now the problem was to find a home for them.

She reached out to the *pradhan* of the village to repair the vacant room in the school and with his help got the room ready. The teacher then roped her students to make drawings which were put up on the walls. "They love to see their art adorning the room. They keep pointing out their drawings to their friends," the 37-year-old teacher laughed.

"I love coming to the library and reading



There is a clothesline in the whitewashed room, but instead of clothes, there are books that are hanging there held in place with the clothespins.

books. They have so many stories and pictures. Ma'am even makes us play games here," said Abhishika, an eight-year-old, with a book of Akbar-Birbal tales in her hand.

Raghunandan Nishad, another student, said he went back home and narrated the stories he read in school to his toddler brother.

The children also play word games in the library, where they sit in a circle on the durrie and roll a handful of dice. The dice have a letter of the alphabet on each side. Whatever the letter they have to call out a word beginning with that.

Shweta Singh is convinced that ever since the library became operational, the children's reading skills have improved. "The picture books and big fonts attract the children and they are reading more," she said.

According to her, the children are also getting more observant and learning to

absorb the details in the books they pick up, from the illustrations, like the kind of trees, the animals, the clothes the characters wear and so on.

There is also a stationary bank in the library. "The students who sometimes forget to get stationary items, or can't afford them, can pick up notebooks, pencils, erasers and colours from this bank," the teacher explained. "I have maintained a register where the borrower makes an entry and returns the loaned item whenever he or she is able to."

The Education Budget 2023, emphasised the promotion of physical libraries in villages and cultivating reading habits in rural children, through these libraries.

And, for Shweta Singh, the mission of setting up one has been satisfying and fulfilling. "It has gathered steam and is now the fondest place for children at the Siktaur Primary School," she smiled. ■

STORY 54

Libraries of opportunities

There are community libraries functioning in 45 blocks in towns and villages in Bihar. Jeevika, an initiative of the state government to alleviate poverty and enhance the quality of life amongst the rural population, hopes to have libraries up and running in 100 blocks of the state.



PHOTOS: RAHUL JHA

RAHUL JHA
PATNA, BIHAR

A LIBRARY IN Singheshwar in Madhepura district in Bihar is slowly but surely transforming the lives of people in the small town. "I had only seen the word 'library' in books. I never thought I would ever visit a library," said

Sweety Kumari, who comes there regularly.

The Singheshwar library provides a comfortable space where people can read newspapers, magazines and books. There are also facilities for online classes for students who may not have such conveniences at their homes. "It is a dream come true for small town inhabitants like us," said Sweety.



Jeevika is also striving to provide career guidance and help to the youth at the cluster level, especially the girls, who are looking to find good jobs.

The community library in Singheshwar that Sweety Kumar is so proud of was launched by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on February 10, 2023. It was set up by the state government under Jeevika, a livelihoods project through the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (BRLPS), an autonomous body under the Department of Rural Development.

In February 2023, Jeevika launched the community library and career development centre programme. At least 100 such community libraries have opened at the block level in 32 districts across the state.

“Libraries and career development centres have been set up in about 45 blocks. The target is to have them up and running in 100 blocks across districts,” said Suman Kumar, a Jeevika functionary in Kishanganj district of Bihar.

“The libraries are not just for the purpose of studies, but they also provide the right

environment for young people to meet, exchange ideas and develop them further,” said Suman Kumar. According to him, Jeevika is trying to provide career guidance and help to the youth at the cluster level, especially the girls, who are looking to find good jobs.

Community libraries and skill development centres have come up in several districts. Some centres that are already functioning are at Garhi Bishnupur panchayat in Sadar Block, Lakhisarai district; Phulwaria village in Barhat Block in Jamui district; Kohra panchayat in Makhdumpur Block in Jehanabad district, and so on.

About 13 million women in the state are associated with Jeevika, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar had tweeted on February 23, 2023. Of these, many of them, called Vidya Didi, will work in these libraries.

According to Jeevika officials, the Vidya Didis will get paid Rs 6,000 a month. They

will run the libraries that will offer textbooks and other learning materials to students from classes 6 to 12.

“Opening the libraries has given wings to our dreams. There are nine members of my family who live out of three rooms and studying becomes very difficult,” said Sapna, a 14-year-old middle school student, who lives in Suryapura in Madhepura district.

Many young students, more so the girls, are unable to study in peace at home and the library provides them the right and safe environment to do so, said Rahul Yadav, who runs a library in Supaul.

“The projectors in some of the libraries are also of great help to the students. Most importantly, these libraries are fostering a culture of reading in these remote areas,” Yadav said.

“With the help of Jeevika, we have opened up a library and career development centre at Goreakothi village, in Siwan district,” said Rakesh Kumar, district programme co-ordinator of Siwan. Along with the books and journals there is space for qualitative and state-of-the-art digital learning.

Anjan Kumari who lives in Patna, the state capital, received training in housekeeping at the skill development centre for three months. “My father works in a private company and my parents did not have the means to let me pursue my studies,” she revealed. When a friend told her about Jeevika’s initiative, she signed up

“Libraries and career development centres have been set up in about 45 blocks. The target is to have them up and running in 100 blocks across districts”

SUMAN KUMAR

JEEVIKA FUNCTIONARY, KISHANGANJ, BIHAR

for housekeeping training. Anjan Kumari has since worked in several big hotels in housekeeping, and plans to study further.

So far, about three million young people in the state have benefitted from Jeevika’s Skill Development and Employment programme. Electrical, electronics, health care, etc., are some of the areas in which the training has been given.

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has had nothing but high praise for the Jeevika programmes, which have brought about considerable change in the lives of the women. And, the libraries have strengthened the foundations of education in rural areas too, said Sanjay Singh, a writer with Rajkamal Publications in Patna.

“Jeevika is now associated with several issues, from employment opportunities for the youth and anti-alcohol drives in villages to rural livelihoods and education,” he said. □

STORY 55

A classroom and a library on the ghats of Ganga

Two young women in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, have started free coaching classes and a library for children of daily wage labourers. From three kids, their classroom on the ghat now has 60.



PHOTOS: BRIJENDRA DUBEY

BRIJENDRA DUBEY

BARIA GHAT (MIRZAPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

IMPERVIOUS TO THE din of traffic around her, Shikha Mishra is writing down numbers on a black board set up on the banks of the Ganga. Watching her with impatience are 30 children, trying to read what she is writing. They are sitting at a clearing that is swept clean in Baria Ghat

village in Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh.

This is the classroom of Shikha Mishra and Purnima Singh where they hold free classes for children in the neighbourhood.

The childhood friends coach children between four and five every evening, said 24-year-old Mishra. She has completed her Masters in Anthropology at the Banaras

Hindu University in Varanasi and is planning to do her PhD (Doctor of Philosophy). Meanwhile, Singh, is already a PhD scholar in Chemistry at the University of Allahabad in Prayagraj.

Every evening, they come to the ghat on their two-wheeler where children between the ages of five and 18 years of age wait for them. The students are predominantly children of daily wage labourers who live near the river's ghat.

“We started these classes with just three children right in the middle of the pandemic, on 29 September, 2020. Now we have 60 children. More want to join us, but it becomes difficult for us to manage any more and we have to turn them away,” said Mishra.

“During the pandemic all government schools had shut down and many of these children did not have the means to attend online classes. That is when we began to teach them here,” said Singh.

She described how unsavoury the ghat was before they started taking classes there. “It was dirty, people drank and smoked here and it seemed unsafe,” she said.

Not any more. “In the olden days people studied in the shade of trees out in the open. We are trying to bring back some of the same ambience here,” Singh laughed.

The coaching centre runs with the help of friends who donate notebooks and other stationery to the children. Mishra and Singh

also spend the allowances they get from their families who are supportive of their work.

“The didis teach us so many things. They have taught us to always be polite and well spoken, they taught us to be fearless, and they are teaching us English and Mathematics,” said Unnati Kesharani, a class six student of Hindu Balika Government School, who comes to the ghat for extra classes.

Mishra and Singh also run a make-shift library for students. “We started the library and spread the word through our Facebook page. Readers wanting books would leave messages for us on the page and we would provide them with the books that they would have to come and read at the ghat for two hours,” Mishra explained.

In case someone wants to take the book home, they have to pay a deposit amount and do so. They can keep the book free of charge for a week, after which they are charged Rs 5 for each extra day, she added.

Mishra and Singh's initiative caught the attention of the people in the area and soon, they featured in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's radio programme Mann Ki Baat.

On November 18, 2020, the prime minister referred to their initiative as a '*chalta phirta pustakalay*' (a mobile library), and ever since the name has stuck. “We have asked for a physical space to have the library and have submitted a petition to concerned authorities, but nothing has come of it yet,” said Mishra. ■

STORY 56

Library on a cart

The Masti ki Pathshala initiative by a social activist in Kolkata, West Bengal, has got children reading books again. A cart loaded with 300 books in English, Hindi, Bengali and Urdu trundles into Rajabazar where nearly 400 families enjoy its benefits, free of cost.



PHOTOS: GURVINDER SINGH

GURVINDER SINGH
KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL

MOHAMMAD HUSSAIN PEDALS hard as he carries his precious burden on a cart attached to his cycle into Rajabazar in North Kolkata. Children clamber on even before it has come to a halt.

This is the impatiently-awaited 'Masti ki Pathshala' (School of Fun) that trundles in here thrice a week, filled with books. Iron shelves

hold about 300 odd books on various subjects and the children can't get enough of it.

Despite her busy life filled with school and private tutors, Mubshara Parveen, a class four student, who lives in Rajabazar, never misses her date with the library. "I have read the books of APJ Abdul Kalam and of Rabindranath Tagore," she said as she rummaged through the shelves for some more reading material.

The crowd and the noise of Rajabazar with buses rumbling past, people selling their

wares at the top of their voices and people everywhere, does not dampen her enthusiasm or of her friends who are busily hunting down books.

The Masti ki Pathshala was started by social activist Shahina Javed, founder of Roshni, a non-profit working on social issues in the city, on December 28, 2022, to get children to fall in love with books again. Roshni has employed Hussain to carry the books on his cycle cart to Rajabazar.

“It is difficult for the children living here to access libraries. There is also the whole bevy of rules and regulations before becoming members of libraries that is not easy,” said Shahina Jave. But through this way, children from nearly 400 families are enjoying its benefits, free of cost.

The library has around 300 books in English, Hindi, Bengali and Urdu. Children between the ages of eight and 16 years are allowed to borrow them and take them home. Shahina Javed also acts as the librarian as she writes down the names of the children and the books they are borrowing.

Books to the tune of Rs 20,000 have been donated by Kalidas Halder, a government school teacher in Bowbazar, Kolkata. When Shahina got in touch with Halder he liked what he heard.

“We want to start 100 more such libraries across the state to attract children into reading,” said Halder. “During the pandemic we even started a library in a



The library has around 300 books in English, Hindi, Bengali and Urdu.

refrigerator that we kept out in the streets. We stuffed the fridge with books and delivered them to people in the neighbourhood. I have already funded 11 libraries from my salary,” he added.

The Masti Ki Pathshala visits Rajabazar thrice a week and on each day it remains stationed in one place for two to three hours. “It’s completely free, and we also organise story telling sessions on Sundays,” said Shahina.

“We love to come here, sit with our friends and read together,” said Alia Noor, a class five student.

Shama Parveen is the mother of 16-year-old Shaishta Parveen, and she couldn’t be happier. “Earlier, my daughter didn’t read at all, but now she collects books from here and reads them when she is free. Such efforts are commendable and should be encouraged as it would inculcate reading habits among children and keep them away from television and cell phones,” the mother said. ■

STORY 57

The Jhola Pustakalay in Thar desert

A government school teacher in Phalodi district, Rajasthan, daily carries books in his cloth bag and lends them to children and adults in the village as he walks to the school. He has also transformed the school in Mandala Khurd village.



KULDEEP CHHAGANI

KULDEEP CHHAGANI
MANDALA KHURD (PHALODI), RAJASTHAN

Government Higher Secondary School where he had studied all those years ago.

BEFORE LEAVING HOME, Hardev Paliwal fills his *jhola* (cloth bag) with books that he will lend to children and grown ups alike he meets them on his way to school. He teaches at the

Paliwal's Jhola Pustakalay is a big hit among the inhabitants of Mandala Khurd village in Phalodi district, Rajasthan.

"I have 200 books and essays on great

people of the world in my *jhola pustakalay*," said the 32-year-old who is passionate about promoting education in rural areas.

One of the first things he did after he became a teacher and joined the school in Mandala Khurd village in 2012 was to increase the enrollment in the school. That time there were 60 girls and 32 boys in the school. Today the school has 425 students out of which 70 per cent are girls, said Paliwal with considerable pride.

There are no middle or high schools in or near the village and because of this the girls invariably discontinued studying beyond the primary level. "I wanted to upgrade the school to class 10, which, at that time, was only an upper primary school, till class five. And, with the efforts of my entire team, in March 2022, we were successful in pulling that off and all government schools in rural Rajasthan were upgraded to class 12," said the teacher.

Paliwal also got the school building refurbished, repaired and repainted, built separate toilets for the girls and made provisions for clean drinking water.

In 2019, during a Republic Day gathering at school, he made an appeal to the teachers to donate a month's salary towards constructing a gate for the school. "Stray cattle wandered in and out and ate up all the saplings we had planted," he said. The school got its brand new gate at a cost of Rs 311,000, all donated by the staff of the school.

This was the catalyst to get the parents of the students to support them in other ways to improve the school.

Paliwal urges his students, colleagues and the village community to be kinder to the environment. During the pandemic, with the help of the Amrita Devi Environmental Organisation, over 1,000 saplings were planted in and around the school in an area of 175,000 square feet.

In 2017-18, with the help of the gram panchayat, Paliwal oversaw the construction of a 50,000 litre tank to ensure the staff and students in the school had clean drinking water throughout the year.

The school boasts of rainwater harvesting, too. "Rainwater that ran off the roof of the school is harvested. Pipes and troughs have been made that lead the run off into the tank. But, before that a filter cleans the water of any leaves and other debris," explained Dinesh Prajapat, a teacher at the school. "Paliwal Sir got three lakh rupees from the panchayat to make the tank," he added.

At present, Paliwal has involved his school children in a project to make eco-bricks out of plastic bottles. He gives them empty plastic bottles and asks them to fill the bottles with plastic waste they find in and around their homes and bring them to school. "The child who brings the most gets a reward and his or her name is announced in the school assembly," said Paliwal. ■

STORY 58

Investing in the future: A book bank in Punjab

Sarabjeet Singh from Muktar Sahib in Punjab lends books to students from low income families to help them prepare for competitive examinations.



AMBIKA TRIPATHI

FOR MALKEET SINGH, a student of class eleven, buying textbooks in braille was an expensive proposition. But help came from an unexpected quarter — a Book Bank that supplied him with braille books.

Today, the 22-year-old holds a government job, and he is ever grateful for the bank and its founder Sarabjit Singh who came to his rescue when he needed help.

“I lost my eyesight when I was 12 years old. I met Sarabjit Sir who helped me a lot. I did well in my board exams and did my

Many students like Malkeet, for want of funds to buy books, give up the idea of appearing for competitive exams. And, it was this fact that inspired Sarabjit Singh to start a book bank at Muktar Sahib in Punjab.

Bachelors too. In 2021, I got a government job. It has been two years and now I am preparing to do my Masters,” said Malkeet.

Many students like Malkeet, for want of funds to buy books, give up the idea of appearing for competitive exams. And, it was this fact that inspired Sarabjit Singh to start a book bank at Muktar Sahib in Punjab.

“I remember the words of my teacher when I was preparing for a competitive exam. She told me, ‘your knowledge will increase if you teach others,’” said Sarabjit Singh. He began by tutoring school children but realised he could do more.

Sarabjeet recalled how at the end of each academic year he sold them to the *raddi wala* (wastepaper picker). But soon, he realised those very same books could be of great value to others. “So, along with a few like minded friends, I began the book bank in 2019,” he said. He also sold old newspapers and with the money bought more text books that could be of use to



The free book bank has about 2,000 books in stock, and they spread the word about the book bank through social media platforms.

the students.

Then, he decided to find a shop in the centre of town where the books could be kept and be easily accessed by whoever needed them.

Sarabjeet runs a bakery which gives him some ready money to keep the book bank running smoothly. “While I am at the bakery, Bakhtawar Singh, who has retired from the army, minds the book bank for me. We have about 2,000 books in the bank, and we spread the word about the book bank through Facebook on social media,” he said. □

STORY 59

A village community library sows ideas of justice in Hardoi, Uttar Pradesh

Bansa Community Library runs from a temple in Bansa village of UP and has become an agent of change as it starts conversations on social evils prevalent in the society.



AISHWARYA TRIPATHI

MAYA DEVI IS only 13 years old but she is vehement in her attack on dowry. “Lena-dena, dono galat hai [Both accepting and giving dowry is wrong],” she said. Devi dreams of joining the police and eradicating the social evils she sees in her village Bansa in Hardoi district, Uttar Pradesh.

From a Scheduled Caste, a traditionally marginalised community, she is no stranger to casteist comments. “Many people say that I am a *chamar* [a casteist slur] and don’t deserve to study. But education is our right. Everyone should get to study,” the teenager added.

The 13-year-old has read up on dowry and caste system at the community library



Inaugurated in the village in December 2020, Bansa Community Library is open to all – with no bar on age, gender, caste and class.

in her village, which was inaugurated in December 2020.

Bansa Community Library, which functions from the village temple complex, is open to all irrespective of age, gender, caste and class. It has 1,700 registered members, both adults and children from the neighbouring villages too.

The library is the dream of Jatin Lalit Singh who belongs to Bansa village. He wanted a space in the village where people could read for pleasure. And that is how the community library started.

The 25-year-old borrowed the idea of starting a community library in his village from The Community Library Project (TCLP) in New Delhi, where he volunteered on weekends while doing his Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Legislative Law in 2016.

While volunteering with TCLP in Delhi, Singh observed personality changes in the

children of migrant labourers who visited the library. He recalled how Daksh, the son of a child of a labourer, transformed from being timid and hesitant in the beginning to becoming confident with great communication skills, all after two years of regularly coming to the library.

“I could only imagine how much of an impact it could create in Bansa, which has many children coming from similar economic and social backgrounds as that of Daksh,” said Singh. For him libraries are a level-playing field.

“While I was growing up, we were only reading course books. We were never taught to read for pleasure. I wanted to give that to my village,” said Singh. “There is an unequal distribution of resources in our country, this library was a small attempt to fill a small bit of that gap,” he added.

Eight-year-old Shashi Sharma, who studies in class 5 and regularly visits the Bansa

library, had never seen so many books in her life before. Finding this world of story books has been exhilarating for her.

“I come every day and issue at least two books in a week to take back home and read. *Maza aata hai* [It is fun],” she said. At eight, Sharma has become a storyteller to her two younger sisters – Sapna and Anjali – whom she narrates stories she reads at the library.

“The community had issues with the library set up because it allowed all genders and castes to sit in the same room, share books and have conversations,” said Singh. “They worried that adolescent girls and boys spending time together could be a problem.”

But over time, these issues have simmered down. “Occasionally, there might still be someone who protests but things change slowly,” he said.

When Singh had started out, he wanted to create a reading culture and help students in the village prepare for competitive exams. The most challenging bit he imagined would be to acquire funding to have a quality infrastructure for a library. “But I realised that was the easiest bit,” Singh laughed.

The library was established with social media and offline crowdfunding. It has two librarians. It is open seven days a week, with extended hours on Sundays from 9 am to 7 pm. “The most difficult part



The transformation of an unused space in the temple premises to a community library.

was mobilising the community to read for pleasure,” he said.

The two librarians at the community library have identified seven girls and four boys who regularly visit the library and have formed a student leadership council. This council dedicates 15 minutes of its time every day for administrative assistance like sorting books and helping younger children reading the books.

Everyone who is part of the functioning of the library belongs to the village community. “It is important for the community to administer it because an outsider can’t really relate to why certain things happen and how to tackle them,” said Singh.

Though there are official timings, anybody is free to walk up and unlock the library on their own if they want to read. ■

STORY 60

Dispelling darkness in Kishanganj, Bihar

Bihar's poorest district, Kishanganj, emerges from the shadows as a library movement takes shape and holds up promise. Seemanchal Library Foundation has set up three rural libraries in Kishanganj that are daily visited by 200 children.



RAHUL JHA

BETWEEN 1 PM and 4 pm every afternoon, 15-year-old Shyam can be found at the Savitri Bai Phule library in Belwa village. He spends time reading there after which he leaves

to graze his buffaloes. Shyam does not go to school.

The library, which was started in June 2021, is located walking distance from his village in Kishanganj district, Bihar. Like Shyam, 80 odd children from the neigh-



Saqib Ahmed, who completed his studies up to class 12, was motivated by his love for literature to establish libraries in his hometown and nearby villages, aiming to share the joy of books with children.

bouring villages frequent this library and 40 of them do not go to any school.

Instead they come here to the library to be taught by Saqib Ahmed, who established this rural library and two others in Kishanganj.

Ahmed, who is the founder of Seemanchal Library Foundation, quit his job in Delhi in 2021, and returned home to Kishanganj to set up the libraries. The first was the Fatima Sheikh Library, in Damalbadi village in Pothia block, in January 2021. The second was the Savitri Bai Phule library opened in Belwa village in the same block in June, and the third one was

the Rukaiyya Sakhawat library at Janta Kanhaiya Badi village in Kochadhaman block in September 2021.

There are about 4,000 books in these three libraries and 200 children visit them every day. Most of them are from Dalit communities and children of daily wage labourers. Many of them work in the fields all day before coming to the libraries to read and learn.

“People in these villages did not even know what a library was. But now things are very different,” said Ahmed, who has studied till class 12 himself.

“I had no desire to study further. Academics

disillusioned me, but I had an insatiable curiosity about the world,” the 27-year-old, added. His love for literature fuelled his determination to spread love for books amongst the children through libraries in his hometown and surrounding villages.

He recalled the beginnings of the Seemanchal Library Foundation. “Five or six of us had formed a literary group. We wanted to expand our discussion and so we went to book shops in the bigger cities to look for more books of verse,” said Ahmed.

But all they found were collections of vulgar verse and booksellers who had not even heard the names of Ghalib or Faiz. “We did not find one bookshop of any merit in the entire district. That is when we decided to open a library,” said Ahmed.

The libraries started off in thatched mud buildings. But in January 2021, Varun Grover, writer and lyricist, made a video where he appealed to people to support this library movement “Many people responded by joining our mission and proper libraries were set up,” said Aaqib Raja who looks after the Savitri Bai Phule library.

The libraries have also become centres of learning and training. “Just recently we organised a multimedia film screening workshop. We held book exhibitions in various places too. Introducing children to the books further strengthens our mission to spread literacy and love for reading,” said Ahmed.

According to him, children who come to the

The libraries are not just for collection of books. They have also become centres of learning and training for many of the children.

library have begun to ask questions, debate, and discuss issues the world faces.

Ayesha Siddiqui, a 15-year-old demanded to know why society was so patriarchal; 13-year-old Dulari Kumari who is from a Dalit family asked if equality that is promised in the Constitution really applied to everyone; 15-year-old Bharathi Kumari wondered if they would have remained ‘untouchables’ had Baba Saheb Ambedkar had not been there.

For sisters Kiran and Suman, 17 and 16 years old respectively, it was an eye opener learning that art can also be a part of education. “Along with the regular lessons, poetry is also read to us. We are encouraged to paint,” said Kiran.

According to Ghulam Yajdani, one of the co-founders, “Children and visitors from outside visit us. I am thrilled because even becoming an object of tourist curiosity lends strength to the movement.”

“The spark in the eyes of the children who come here after they have slogged all day, lends the strength to our library movement,” concluded Ahmed. □



SECTION 6

SPORTS STARS OF RURAL INDIA

FAR AWAY FROM THE SPOTLIGHT OF ROARING STADIA AND SPORTS CHANNELS,
A SPORTS REVOLUTION IS UNDERWAY IN RURAL INDIA.



STORY 61

Net winners at Khel Gaon in Rajasthan

Coach Basant Singh Mann's ancestral village Silwala Khurd in Hanumangarh district is known as Khel Gaon, where he has trained hundreds of volleyball players who have won medals both nationally and internationally.

AMARPAL SINGH VERMA
HANUMANGARH, RAJASTHAN

RRESPECTIVE OF RAIN, cold or blistering heat, 69-year-old Basant Singh Mann turns up at the playfield at five in the morning. He is there half an hour before his wards troop in.

"I have never seen Coach Mann be late for practice," said Ajit Singh Sekhon, a volleyball player. Sekhon is just one of hundreds of volleyball players from Hanumangarh district who have trained under Coach Mann.

"I began training under him when I was in class six. I am now in my second year of Bachelors. I have played umpteen number of times for Rajasthan, seven times at a national level and was selected for the national team thrice," said Sekhon who is also from Silwala Khurd.

In 2022, at the 21st Asian Championships held at Bahrain, Sekhon was part of the under 20 team that returned with the silver medal in volleyball.

Mann's coaching has led to a tribe of



It comes as no surprise that Silwala Khurd, the ancestral village of Mann in Hanumangarh district, has come to be known as Khel Gaon, thanks to the coach.

volleyball players emerging from the rural pockets of Hanumangarh district in Rajasthan. In the past four decades he has coached 1,300 players who went on to become national medalists. Many of them have also played in international tournaments, seven of whom have won several medals.

It comes as no surprise that Silwala Khurd, the ancestral village of Mann in Hanumangarh district, has come to be known as Khel Gaon.

Though he retired in 2014, Mann continues

to coach children from the school and from nearby villages at the school grounds in Silwala Khurd.

“Coach Mann has brought such honour and pride to the village. It is his hard work that has brought us here,” Subhash Suthar, an auto spare parts dealer and the father of international volleyball player Kavita Suthar, said. Subhash Suthar’s son Sunil and daughter Kavita are both volleyball players of considerable skill. His nieces are also being coached by Basant Singh Mann.

“I started training under Coach Mann when



In the 21 years Coach Basant Singh Mann was at the institution, 13 players he coached went on to play internationally. More than thousand have played at the national level.

I was in class six. I just passed class 12,” said Kavita, who has won 10 medals at the state level, and was captain of the under-18 volleyball team that played in Thailand at the Asian Championships last year.

“It is solely because of coach Mann that girls in our village are being encouraged to play and so many of them have done so well,” Kavita added.

Coach Mann joined Gramotthan Vidyapeeth College of education in Sangaria in Hanumangarh district in 1980 as a physical instructor and was posted there till 2011. There he trained people in volleyball, kho-kho, kabaddi and athletics. Thereafter he was posted to the government senior secondary school at his ancestral village, Silwala Khurd.

Since 2011, he has trained 155 players who are national level players today. “They have all done the village proud. And, 125 of them are girls. Three of the girls I coached,

Kavita Suthar, Sukhveer Kaur and Alpana, played at the international level,” Mann said with pride.

“It is a matter of such pride to us that Hanumangarh district is becoming known as a place for emerging volleyball players,” Shamsheer Singh, district sports officer for Hanumangarh, said. Every other coach should take inspiration from him, he added.

Mann is currently secretary of the Volleyball Association in Hanumangarh district. He is senior vice president of the Rajasthan Volleyball Association, and member of the Indian Volleyball Association.

“It is a matter of celebration for me whenever my students win glory in sports. For me, coaching is not a profession, it is my duty and my passion,” Mann said. “I see sports as an avenue for success, a better life and a successful future for my students,” he concluded. ■

STORY 62

Scoring goals in Ganderbal

Muzamil Mahmood, a primary school teacher in Ganderbal district, J&K, shares his love for football with the children in his school and the villages of Kashmir Valley.



URVAT IL WUSKA

GANDERBAL, JAMMU & KASHMIR

MUZAMIL MAHMOOD LIVES and breathes football. There is nothing Muzamil loves more than imparting his love for the game to the students of the Gogjigund village primary school in Ganderbal district, Jammu & Kashmir, where he is a teacher and a football coach.

The 42-year-old holds an Asian Football Confederation licence, a coveted accred-

itation for coaches in the Indian football fraternity, and is a coach in national tournaments. But his first love is teaching football. He has established the Football Club (FC) Ganderbal.

“As a child, I used to practise for hours at the local playground, and my older relatives were exasperated with me. Because, having a career in football was unheard of those days. There was no one to guide me,” he recalled.

“I would go on foot to Srinagar, 23 kilometres away, so that I could practise in the

playground there, away from disapproving eyes,” said the football coach.

That is why he decided to be that guide and coach for others like him who dream of a career in football.

“At the FC Ganderbal, we train two age groups – Under 12 and Under 16. The students come either in the morning before school or after school hours,” he explained. Hundreds of children have passed through the portals of FC.

“I am very thankful to Muzamil Sir because at a time when young people are falling prey to drugs, he gave me the opportunity to stay clean and join his academy and work hard to make my future bright,” said 16-year-old player Fazil Yusuf from FC Ganderbal who has played in other states as well.

Muzamil became a teacher at the Government Primary School in Ganderbal in 2002, where he taught English, but he was always inclined towards football. He won the Best Coach award for the promotion of football in Jammu and Kashmir in 2007.

Four years later, in 2011, Muzamil visited Brazil, with the help of Juan Marcos Troia. Troia, an Argentine football coach, who was in Kashmir from 2006 to 2012, coaching and scouting young talent in the state. Muzamil went to Brazil for a month to do a course in coaching. After returning, he established the FC Ganderbal.

“I feel very lucky to be a school teacher as

Muzamil goes from school to school in the district to tell students about football. He even built a football team in his village school to play in inter school tournaments.

well as a coach because my profession helped me motivate children to play football,” Muzamil said.

Muzamil often spends his school salary on buying uniforms, shoes, and kits for his students, many of whom cannot afford to do so. “I spend every penny of my savings to promote this sport in my village and to encourage others to join me,” said the coach. “Even if I become an international coach, it will not change my love for the children of my village. My motive is not to earn money or fame but to promote football amongst the young people,” he added.

“When I started coaching at the club in 2011, there was just me doing the coaching and training, but now, three of my former students who I trained are coaches along with me,” said the proud teacher.

To those from other states, Muzamil says: “Visit us to see the talent of the young players here. Invest your money for a good cause and open more sporting academies for the youngsters”. □

STORY 63

So that they never walk in fear...

Asha Suman has taught self defence to more than 30,000 girls including 300 visually impaired and speech and hearing impaired ones, and women constables.

RAJESH KHANDELWAL

IN 2015, SOMETHING horrific happened in Kishangarh Bas, in Alwar district, that shook Asha Suman, who at that time was teaching at the Government Primary School, Delhi Wale Rajputo Ki Dhani, Khanpur Mewan.

“A girl was raped in a nearby village. As a consequence, parents in the village just stopped sending them to school,” Suman recalled. It got her thinking. That year, she attended a course in self defence at the Police Academy in Jaipur, and so began her journey of training village girls in self defence.

She began to visit schools in the Kishangarh Bas area, and organised camps to train the girls. She also visited 12 other districts in the state and held free self-defence camps there. Suman virtually trained nearly 8,000 teachers across 24 states in the country.

“I must have trained about 30,000 girls. I went to Mumbai where I learnt to teach self defence to girls who were visually challenged



PHOTOS: RAJESH KHANDELWAL

Asha Suman's students said their confidence improved after they learned self-defense.

or speech and hearing impaired. I have trained about 300 such girls,” Suman said.

Monica Bairva who was doing a B.Ed internship at Kharkheda in Rajgarh, said she learnt self defence from Suman. “My self confidence improved after that,” said

the 24-year-old.

“Asha Suman has even trained women constables in Alwar in self defence in 2020-21. What she is doing will definitely increase the self confidence amongst girls, and will hopefully bring an end to crimes against women,” said Sriman Meena (RPS), who was the then Additional SP (Rural), Alwar.

Asha Suman published two books on self defence. The first book elaborates on the different kinds of self defence girls could learn. Then, in 2023, she brought out a second version of the book with illustrations on self defence that has been quite motivating for children from classes one to eight.

“For me education, health, students and their safety, are everything,” the teacher said. Hindi, Political Science, and Geography are her areas of study and she has a Masters in those subjects besides doing her B.Ed. The 44-year-old also holds a Bachelors in Journalism and Mass Communication.

The teacher has also made animated educational videos for children of classes I to V. “I found that these videos helped the children grasp lessons faster,” she said.

About a 100 videos she has made have been telecast in Doordarshan’s programme, Shiksha Darshan. She gave her YouTube channel called Aasha Ki Pathshala to the education department Rajasthan.

“Asha Suman is doing a wonderful job of training young girls in self defence. She is



The department of social justice and empowerment awarded the teacher.

now training master trainers,” Neki Ram, chief district education officer (Primary), said. He added that her work with visually challenged and hearing and speech impaired girls was commendable.

She is also preparing content for the Rajasthan State Council of Educational Research & Training in Udaipur and was honoured by them.

Because of the tremendous role she has been playing in women empowerment, Asha Suman was chosen as the brand ambassador this year for Alwar district for the Beti Bachao, Beti Pado movement.

The department of social justice and empowerment awarded her with the Ambedkar Mahila Puraskar Award in 2023. In 2021, Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot honoured her in Jaipur at a State Level Teacher Award Ceremony.

“I am grateful for all these awards. But the best reward for me is when every child is capable of taking care of herself and there is a glow of confidence in her eyes,” she said. □

STORY 64

Sports and art go hand in hand for twin-brother teachers

Identical twins, Mastan and Naseeb Singh teach sports in their respective government schools in Hanumangarh, Rajasthan. The brothers are also sketch artists and use art to send out special messages.



AMARPAL SINGH

AMARPAL SINGH VERMA HANUMANGARH, RAJASTHAN

IDENTICAL TWINS MASTAN Singh and Naseeb Singh teach physical education in two government schools in Rajasthan's Hanumangarh district. Their life trajectories have been curiously similar as they continue to inspire their students in sporting activities as well as art. They have also been extremely supportive to the

government's development programmes.

Not only do they look and sound alike, they have also both chosen to be teachers and were employed as physical education teachers on the same day. Mastan Singh teaches at Lakhasar village and Naseeb Singh teaches at Hansliya village, both in Hanumangarh district.

Mastan Singh is an accomplished

cartoonist too. For years he has, through his cartoons, encouraged people to vote during elections, and his contributions have been greatly appreciated. There are no election campaigns in Hanumangarh that do not use Mastan's cartoons.

The Rajasthan State Council of Education Research and Training, Udaipur has recommended that 20 textbooks for classes one to five in the state government schools be rendered into comic form. Mastan Singh worked on them for over a year and has contributed the illustrations to the text books.

The brothers were born in 1974 to Sardar Teja Singh, an engine driver based in Hanumangarh Junction. They both completed their Masters in Physical Education, M Phil and are NET qualified. They are passionate about playing hockey and are hockey coaches in their schools.

Born into a Sikh household, both brothers are inspired by the paintings of the Sikh gurus done by the eminent artist, Sobha Singh.

"No one really taught us to paint. We just began to copy the paintings of the Gurus we saw hanging on our walls. People began to appreciate them, and we continued to paint," said Naseeb.

Naseeb did more paintings while Mastan did a lot of illustration work. Mastan Singh has used his cartoons for several social causes. During the pandemic he ran an entire series on social media on it. His cartoon depicting the heroic work done in

the field by students during the pandemic was shared by the minister of state for primary and secondary education, Govind Singh Dotasra on his Facebook page.

"Mastan Singh has used his cartooning skill to support government work, that too without any monetary benefit. Whenever we have approached him for help, he has stepped up," Suresh Kumar Bishnoi, information and public relations officer, Hanumangarh, said.

"His brother Naseeb Singh has also wholeheartedly supported the programmes of the district. The district administration has honoured both of them for having contributed so significantly to the programmes of SVEEP [Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation]," Bishnoi added.

"Both brothers are a treasure to the education department," Poorna Dev, Pilibanga-based additional Block Education Officer, said. "They have raised the standard of hockey players and many of them who have trained under them have competed at the national level," he added.

According to the block education officer, the brothers have also found sponsors for the players. "They had a huge role to play in the rural and urban olympic games organised by the state government last year," he said. ■

STORY 65

Rural girls hop, skip and jump their way to sporting glory

In a small village in Hanumangarh, Rajasthan, girls who were discouraged from even dreaming about higher education, are now winning medals and trophies, thanks to a sports teacher.



KUMAR SHYAM

IT WAS A giant step for the girls of Baramsar village in Rajasthan's Hanumangarh district when they traded their *salwar kameez* for sports jerseys and track pants.

When Chandrapal Beniwal joined the

government school in the village as a sports teacher, there was not a single girl participating in sporting events. The village lies about 400 kms away from the state capital Jaipur. It borders both Haryana and Punjab.

But things changed and girls from the Government Higher Secondary School at Baramsar have covered themselves, their



At the 26th district football tournament from October 20-23, Baramsar School's team excelled, securing the top spot.

school and the district laurels at the state level, in glory.

In early 2021, at the 26th district level football tournament held between October 20 and 23, the team of the Baramsar school was at the top of its game and came first in the district.

“When the girls of our school performed so well and returned with the trophy and medals won at the state’s sports meet in the under-17 category, the village inhabitants greeted them with flowers and a band,” the jubilant sports and physical instructor Beniwal, said.

“This would have been unimaginable even a few years ago. The school didn’t even have a playing field and I took PT classes in

a lane next to the school. And even there, there were hardly any girls in the class,” he recalled.

Traditionally, girls in the village couldn’t afford to dream of either sports or even higher education. Their outdoor activities were limited to playing with siblings on their doorsteps.

But Beniwal brought about change. “In my first year here, I remember one girl being selected for the under-17 football team. But her family flatly refused to let her go. We had to work hard to persuade the family,” Beniwal said.

After that changes happened, but gradually. One of the village inhabitants allowed the school to use his empty plot of land as



In the 26th District Level Sports Meet in 2021-22, the girls of Baramsar created history.

a playground and sporting equipment was bought with the help of state support and that of some generous villagers.

“When we begin selecting and training for competitions, of the hundred children who turn up, more than sixty are girls,” said Beniwal.

“Thanks to Beniwal Sir we have been able to take part in sports and do well in them,” said Ritu, who has since participated in several events. She took part in the district level athletics meet in 2017-18 and won third place. She also took part in the 62nd State Level Athletics Meet in the 200 metre run event.

For the first time Baramsar’s school participated in the 22nd district athletics meet held in 2016-17, and in that very year, Maya Godara, a class seven student of the school, won first place in the under-14 long jump event.

In 2018-19, at the 24th district level kabaddi tournament, a team made up of 14-year-old girls from the school took part. Nasreena, a student of class eight showed her mettle and won an opportunity to represent the district at the 63rd State Level tournament and was part of the winning team.

Nasreena also excelled in the high jump event at the district athletics meet and qualified to represent the district at the state level. These feats opened up the doors for the girls of Baramsar.

Beniwal on his part wants to see the girls of Barasmar shine not only in the district, state and national levels, but also internationally. He regretted that the village had no play ground where the children could train well. “If the state authorities could step forward and help in setting up an infrastructure for sports and games, the students and I will do the rest of the hard work,” he said. ■

STORY 66

Bringing the girls in

Upgrading the government school to higher secondary level has upped the number of girls in Bijauli village Dholpur, Rajasthan continuing with their studies.



MANOJ CHOUDHARY

MANY GIRLS stayed home after middle school as Bijauli village in Dholpur, Rajasthan, did not have a high school, and their parents were not about to send them far away from home. But when, in 2014, the Rajkiya Uchcha Madhyamik Vidyalaya was upgraded to senior secondary level, the transformation was dramatic.

“Now 55 per cent of the students in the

school are girls,” said Renu Gurjar, the history teacher at the high school.

Ever since the school was upgraded, it has been winning accolades. In 2022, its team won the first prize in two categories in a science model making competition organised by the Rajasthan School Siksha Parishad.

Two years ago, 10 students were given laptops by the state government for securing over 75 per cent marks in the

matriculation examination. The school was also awarded by the state government for 'No Drop Out' in Bijauli in 2020.

"Our village is made up of 409 households and most of us are daily wage labourers and farmers. The school has been the best thing that has happened to our children," Pinky Devi, a resident of Bijauli told Gaon Connection. She said that the focus on academics as well as sporting activities in the school would open up opportunities for the children who came from economically weaker sections.

The kabaddi team of the school has played up to the state level event in 2020. Eight students from the school played cricket at the school olympics at the block level in 2022. A class 12 student, Vijay Singh, was selected for the state level wrestling competition in 2022, and the school students were members of the Bijauli panchayat kabaddi and cricket teams in the Rajiv Gandhi Gramin Olympic event in August 2023.

"Rajkiya Uchcha Madhyamik Vidyalaya has a 1.65-acre playground where students play different sports. Panchayat level general public sports activities are also organised there," Damor Lal Chand, the school's sports teacher told Gaon Connection. They have proved their excellence in kabaddi, cricket, volleyball, kho kho and karate, he said with pride.

Recently, a smart television was given by the state government to the high school in June 2023 for conducting e-classes. Students attend online classes through the

A smart television was given by the state government to the high school in June 2023 for conducting e-classes. Students attend online classes through the 'E.Kaksha' app if some teacher is absent.

'E.Kaksha' app if some teacher is absent.

According to the principal, Rajendra Kumar Sharma, many students of the school have gone on to become government school teachers themselves. One of them, Amresh Kushwaha, is a doctor today, while another student Neeraj Kushwaha is pursuing his PhD.

Many people have stepped forward to help the school reach greater heights. Member of legislative assembly (MLA) from Bari, Girraj Singh Malinga donated 100 benches to the school when the school was nominated as a centre for 10th and 12th board examination. A retired teacher of the school Shiv Singh Meen, donated another 25 benches for the students.

"Public representatives, villagers, non-government organisations and former teachers are constantly helping out. Their names are displayed on the walls of the school so that students also get inspired," said Bharat Bhushan Bhardwaj, another teacher at the school. ■



SECTION 7

OUT OF SYLLABUS

THEIR JOB DESCRIPTION DOES NOT INCLUDE IT, BUT THERE ARE TEACHERS WHO ARE FIGHTING SOCIAL ILLS SUCH AS CHILD MARRIAGE, ALCOHOLISM, AND CHILD LABOUR.



STORY 67

A teacher tackles alcoholism in a village to address absenteeism at school

A software engineer-turned-primary school teacher at Kushma Khurd village in Gorakhpur, is setting right not just absenteeism, but also trying to deal with rampant alcoholism amongst its menfolk.

AISHWARYA TRIPATHI
KUSHMA KHURD (GORAKHPUR),
UTTAR PRADESH

SAKSHI NISHAD TOOK a moment to recall her age. "I am seventeen," she said, after a minute. Despite her age and tall stature, Sakshi, who was neatly dressed in her school uniform of chequered red and white shirt and brown

skirt, is only in class five.

But, that is because Sakshi started late. She had long enrolled into the school but rarely attended it, so her name was taken off. It was only four years ago that she re-enrolled and started regularly coming to the school and has never missed the classes since then.

The credit for bringing Sakshi and several



The village inhabitants mostly belong to the economically and socially marginalised communities like the *mallahs* (traditional boatmen). AISHWARYA TRIPATHI

other children of Kushma Khurd village in Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh goes to Pradeep Kashyap who teaches at the government primary school in the village located 250 kilometres from the state capital Lucknow.

Apart from teaching students of the village, Kashyap has also launched a campaign to tackle alcoholism among the menfolk of the village, which was affecting education of the children.

Pradeep Kashyap, a software engineer by education, was always drawn to the idea of improving children's lives and when the opportunity arose, he joined the government primary school in Kushma Khurd village in 2018.

"During the training by DIET [District Institute of Education & Training], I underwent before I joined full time, everything seemed fine, but once I was appointed, and this was my first posting, I saw the immense challenges that lay before me," said Kashyap.

Not the least of it was rampant alcoholism in Kushma Khurd, which had a deep impact on the lives and education of the children. The village has a population of 1,142. "Out of 101 enrolled students, only 40 attended class. All the students sat in a single classroom and the learning was minimal," he narrated.

Almost 90 per cent of the men in the village were alcohol addicts and it was common to see the children come to school with no proper clothing nor stationery and the hygiene was poor, he added.

The village inhabitants mostly belong to the economically and socially marginalised communities like the *mallahs* (traditional boatmen), and most men are employed as daily wage labourers. Their income is uncertain and whatever they earn usually goes into buying alcohol.

Sakshi's father is an alcoholic too. "He doesn't let me study. He keeps asking me to do some chore or the other and hits both me and my mother," said Sakshi.

Her classmates Mamta Nishad and Ritnesh Nishad, also faced the same problem at home. “My father hits me and my mother but I don’t speak up because of fear of being hit again,” 15-year-old Mamta said in a low voice.

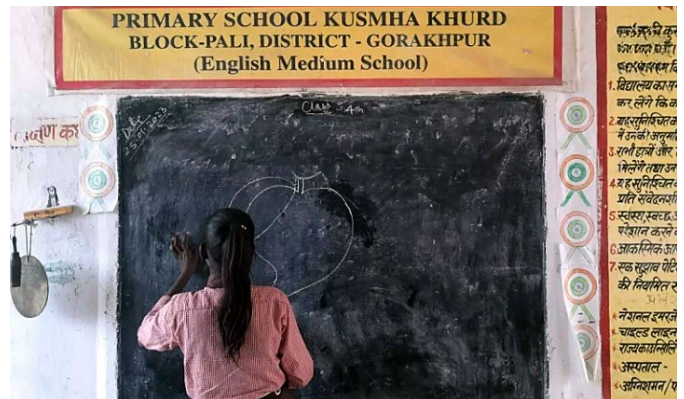
Kashyap realised early that he had an elephantine problem to deal with. “Within a year, I built my house 200 metres away from school to better monitor the kids and ensure that they were not absent,” 34-year-old Kashyap explained.

Kashyap started riding through the village gullies on his bike to rally any loitering children. Yashoda Nishad, a fifth grader, recalled how she had decided to skip school as her uniform was not washed and clean.

“Sir came home looking for me. I tried to hide, but he stood there till I emerged and then took me to school,” she said. “There is a *talaiya* (pond) in the village, where the boys gather to play *goli* (marbles). Sir catches them all and gets them to school,” she giggled.

Kashyap is convinced that education is the way forward for these kids to escape abuse and alcoholism. “The problem will be solved only when the children are educated, they get a job and take charge of their families,” he said.

“Earlier, the kids roamed around wild playing goli or gulli-danda. But now, Pradeep sir comes home and takes them off to school with him. He makes the chil-



Kashyap is convinced that education is the way forward for the children of Kushma Khurd village.

dren bathe at the handpump near school, in case they are not clean enough, and only then allows them in,” said Chanda Devi, mother of Yuvraj and Akshay who study in Class 3 and Class 1, respectively.

He has created such a buzz in the village with his approach that parents of children studying in private schools now want them to move into the Kushma Khurd government school. The enrollment in the school has jumped to 245.

To address alcoholism in the village, Kashyap constantly counsels the women in the village. “We interact with the mothers of the students during the monthly parents- teachers meetings. I emphasise how the only way out of their misery is getting their children educated,” said Kashyap.

But, he said he knew it was an uphill battle as the women were fighting to survive each day. And, alcoholism is something that cannot be turned off overnight, he pointed out. ▣

STORY 68

A government teacher in a village school in Udaipur teaches child traffickers a lesson

A teacher in the government primary school, in Pargiyapada village, Rajasthan has found himself in the role of a saviour as he has swooped in and rescued 400 children in and around the area from the clutches of child traffickers.



PHOTOS: AMARPAL SINGH VERMA

AMARPAL SINGH VERMA
PARGIYAPADA (UDAIPUR), RAJASTHAN

DURGARAM MUVAL, A teacher at a government primary school at Pargiyapada village in Udaipur district, Rajasthan, has become a household

name because of his herculean efforts to rescue hundreds of children from the clutches of child traffickers. Pargiyapada village lies about 54 kilometres from the district headquarters and has a population of about 2,000, most of them tribal communities, who depend on forest



Muval's efforts have resulted in increased enrolment in the schools in neighbouring villages too.

produce for their livelihood.

Muval joined the school in March 2008. "Barely a month into my new appointment, I stumbled upon something disturbing. I learnt that children from the villages in the area were being trafficked to Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh etc., to work in farms, hotels and factories there," the 37-year-old teacher said.

Extreme poverty sometimes led to the parents playing into the hands of the child traffickers. "The police are helpless too. The parents of the children retract their statements and sometimes it is obvious that they have handed over their kids to be taken away in exchange for money," said Muval. On January 25, 2023, Muval prevented an 11-year-old child from being taken away by the traffickers.

The biggest rescue operation happened on April 10, 2022. "My companions and I were suspicious about the movements

of a woman and were keeping an eye on her. Sure enough on April 10, she had gathered 25 girls at Bagpur village and had seated them in a vehicle, when we reached there. She and her accomplices fled the scene and we brought the 25 girls home. We learnt later that there were nearly 100 girls who were to be trafficked from there that day," said Muval.

So far, Muval has rescued more than 400 children, most of them girls from the clutches of the traffickers, he said.

According to Muval, there is a certain social stigma attached to filing FIRs for missing children and parents are not willing to do that. But they approach him to help trace their children.

"I built up a team of informers and would get information when plans were afoot to smuggle children out," said Muval.

Seen as a saviour Jagdish Kasaut, the

sarpanch of Madri Gram Panchayat, under which Pargiyapada falls, lauded the school teacher's heroic deeds. "He has not just rescued children from being trafficked, but he has also got them back into the classrooms to get an education," said the sarpanch.

"Three years ago a class six student of Pargiyapada was taken away to Gujarat to work as labourer. But, when Master ji learnt of it, he began to investigate and ultimately his investigations led him to where she was. He brought her back from there and handed her over to her parents," he added.

Muval gets a lot of support from the police and the childline. "The childline works from 10 am to 4 pm, while trafficking happens mostly at night. So sometimes there is no way to inform anyone or ask for help. At other times the patchy mobile network lets us down. But whenever we have sought the help of the police and the childline officials, they have extended full help," he said.

So far, as a result of the FIRs filed by some of the parents, the police have been able to nab about 30 child traffickers, Muval added.

Mohanram Lohar, the subcoordinator of the childline services in Jhadol area, was all praises for the work Muval was doing.

"Muval is preventing child labour and providing education to them. I have seen him operate work at close quarters and if only more people were like him, the chil-



Durgaram Muval won the National Award for Teachers that was given to him by President Draupadi Murmu last year.

dren of our country would always be safe," said Lohar.

Narendra Tak, additional district education officer, Udaipur said that the problem of child trafficking was an old one in the district, but Muval had done spectacular work in standing up to it. "No other educator has worked like he has to stem the rot. He has clashed with the traffickers unmindful of the danger he has put himself into and also worked with parents of the children to prevent children being given away," said Tak.

In acknowledgement of his singular service, Muval won the National Award for Teachers that was given to him by President Draupadi Murmu on Teacher's Day, on 5th September 2022. Earlier that year, on April 17, he was also honoured by the then Inspector General of Police, Udaipur, Hinglaj Dan Barhath. ■

STORY 69

A headmaster's crusade against child labour in tribal Jharkhand

Arbind Kumar Tiwary, a headmaster of a government school in tribal dominated East Singhbhum district, is ensuring education to first generation learners of a particularly vulnerable tribal group.



PHOTOS: MANOJ CHOUDHARY

MANOJ CHOUDHARY

TANGRAIN (EAST SINGHBHUM), JHARKHAND

ARBIND KUMARTIWARY never really knows what is in store for him on a day at school. The 51-year-old is the headmaster in-charge of Utkramit Madhya Vidyalaya, a government school in the Santhal-dominated Tangrain village

in East Singhbhum district, Jharkhand.

On some days, if he finds absentees, he heads to their home to find out why they are not at school, and takes them back with him. Many of the students of the school belong to a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG), and are first generation learners who live in the Sabar Basti of the village.



Tiary has taken it upon himself to spread awareness about healthcare too.

Around 14 Sabar tribe families reside in this Basti, and before 2022, no child from here had ever been to school, even though the school was walking distance from where they lived. “Due to my sustained efforts, six Sabar children took admission in class three in 2022, and they are now promoted to class four,” said the 51-year-old teacher. He is especially happy because many of the children of the Sabar tribe were working as child labour.

“My two sons, Deshuba Sabar and Doctor Sabar, study in class four of the school. Two years ago Deshuba worked in a nearby village,” said Soma Sabar, the father of the kids, and went on to add that he was paid Rs 4,000 annually to let his son work there.

When Arbind Tiary came to know of it, he rescued the child and put him and his brother in school. “Because of poverty and illiteracy, Sabar do not send their children to school and let them go and work as *dangar* (child labour) in order to augment the family income,” Soma Sabar added.

But after his sons started school, other Sabar families have followed suit and are sending their children to school too.

The Sabar community traditionally lives off forest produce, selling and using them to sustain themselves. “I found their health care in a sad state of neglect. Most of them visited quacks and never went to government health centres,” said Tiary.

According to him, there is rampant alcoholism, malnutrition and general lack of awareness amongst the tribal community. “Mothers die young and fathers migrate in search of jobs leaving the children unattended and uncared for,” he said. Many of them are left in care of relatives who themselves are struggling to survive,” the headmaster pointed out.

Tiary has taken it upon himself to spread awareness about health care too. He helps students and their families visit doctors at the health centres, and if need be, helps them get admitted to government hospi-



Tiary has also ensured free accommodation and food for students from Tangrain and other villages.

tals, and monitors their recovery.

Sighrai Sabar of Sabar Basti had tuberculosis and instead of taking him to the hospital, family members were getting him treated from a quack. “Arbind Sir got me admitted to hospital and I am much better now,” said Sighari.

Similarly, in 2014, he helped Thakur Murmu, a class five student of Janata Madhya Vidyalaya in Chhota Gobindpur. Thakur had no father and his mother made ends meet by selling rice beer. Thakur was very sickly and could not afford any medical treatment. Tiary got him admitted in the hospital for some bone ailment, and the boy was cured.

Amal Kumar Dikshit, a teacher at the school, said the headmaster went out of his way to serve his students. “Under his leadership the school has achieved name and fame in East Singhbhum. And, all of us, his colleagues, try our best to support him in his mission,” said Dikshit.

“The headmaster’s dedication and

commitment towards his students has led almost all the village children to school. Tiary ensures they are well looked after,” said Ujawal Kumar, a resident of Tangrain.

The education department also lauds the headmaster’s efforts. “Arbind Kumar Tiary has played an important role in the development of the school. He has positively changed the academic atmosphere in rural areas,” said Vinay Kumar Dubey, block education extension officer (BEEO) in Potka, West Singhbhum.

“The education department appreciates his effort of rescuing children from child labour and setting them on the path of learning,” the official added.

“A teacher can be a good teacher if only he or she is sensitive to humanity,” said Tiary. “For me, I want to ensure all my students become good human beings before anything else. Academic qualifications can come later.”

Tiary has received district level best teacher awards in 2020 and 2021. ▣

STORY 70

A principal and a psychiatrist team up to spread awareness on mental health

The principal of a private school in a small town in Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan, is not only working for the cause of education, but is also leading a movement to spread awareness about mental health amongst villagers.



PHOTOS: AMARPAL SINGH VERMA

AMARPAL SINGH VERMA
HANUMANGARH, RAJASTHAN

WHEN HE IS not at school, Mahavir Goswami, the principal of Bal Navjeevan Senior Secondary School in the small town of

Sangaria, can be seen walking around the bylanes of villages and hamlets in Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan where his school is located.

For the past 12 years, Goswami has been selflessly and tirelessly running



The Mukti campaign, of which Mahavir Goswami was an integral part, was to liberate all those who have been kept chained up like cattle on account of their mental health problems.

a campaign to address issues around mental health and drug abuse among the villagers. Organising health camps, helping villagers connect with counsellors and psychologists is not part of his job as a principal, but the 48 year-old educator has gone beyond the call of duty to fight the growing problem of mental illness. And it hasn't been an easy journey.

“This campaign has been a challenge since many people in rural areas are unaware of mental health issues and psychiatric care and that they can be treated,” said Goswami. “Even to get them to listen to us was difficult and there were times they were positively hostile when we approached them to talk to them about their family member who was being mistreated or chained up due to some mental illness,” he added.

But Goswami's efforts have found full support from psychiatrist Dr Dhanesh Kumar Gupta, who lives about 6,500 kilometres away in Singapore. A senior

consultant at the government-run Institute of Mental Health in Singapore, Dr Gupta hails from Sangaria village in Hanumangarh and has a special interest in addressing health issues in his homeland.

Both the principal and the psychiatrist have teamed up to organise awareness drives and health camps to screen rural population for mental health issues and provide them some medical support.

The mental health campaign that began in Hanumangarh has now spread to other districts in Rajasthan such as Churu, Sri Ganganagar and Bikaner. It is also making a difference in Sirsa in Haryana, and Sri Muktsar Sahib and Faridkot districts in Punjab.

It was five years ago that Goswami became the principal of Bal Navjeevan Senior Secondary School. Along with education, the teacher always had a spirit of social service and he joined Samaj Sudhar Manch, a social work organisa-

tion in Sangaria. It is through this social organisation that his paths crossed with that of Dr Gupta.

Back in August 2010, this social organisation had organised a de-addiction camp in the area and many renowned psychologists and psychiatrists took part in it. Psychiatrist Dr Gupta was there, all the way from Singapore. Gupta was at that time working on a project that was to help people with mental health issues, and he discussed the matter with Goswami.

Dr Gupta was concerned at the way people with mental health were treated in the rural areas of Sangaria. He had seen how they were sometimes just chained up and left to languish. When he won a fellowship under the Hafri Alumni Award, for Rs 20 lakh, Gupta decided to have a mental health campaign in Sangaria. It was when he visited Sangaria to start planning the campaign, he met Goswami. He asked Goswami if he would be willing to work for the campaign, and the teacher immediately agreed.

Dr Gupta launched the campaign on mental health awareness in January 2011. He did this under the auspices of Nishkam Foundation, a non-profit based in Gurgaon, Haryana, that works in the field of Mental Health and Drug Abuse. He would visit Sangaria for a two-day mental health camp every month from Singapore for those who needed psychiatric help.

It is principal Goswami who has been

handling all the arrangements to make the two-day camp a success since 2011. It was the teacher's tireless efforts that made the first awareness campaign a huge success as many people turned up with friends and relatives who were suffering from one form of mental health issue or the other.

One of the special campaigns Nishkam Foundation runs is the one to liberate all those who have been kept chained up like cattle on account of their mental health problems.

The Mukti Campaign as it was named was launched in February 2014. So far, 120 such people with mental health problems have been freed. Many of them had resorted to sorcery to try and cure their afflicted family members.

"Nishkam Foundation has organised 163 mental health awareness camps so far. More than 7,500 people with mental health problems have attended these camps and been counselled and treated. We are committed to the cause," he added.

"Goswami has been working selflessly on this campaign for 12 years. He is a shining example of a devoted, tireless and dedicated team player," said psychiatrist Dr Gupta, who is also the founding president of Nishkam Foundation. ■

STORY 71

A teacher holds 'exclusive' classes to educate rural girls about menstrual hygiene

Shringika Rao, a teacher in Brahmpur Upper Primary School in Gorakhpur district, takes a special effort to educate her girl students about periods and the importance of menstrual hygiene, which are a taboo topic in rural areas.



AISHWARYA TRIPATHI

BRAHMPUR (GORAKHPUR), UTTAR PRADESH

NISHA WAS IN the fields working when she got her periods for the first time three years ago. The 14-year-old girl of Brahmpur village was petrified. "I saw blood and came

running back home, scared. I asked my elder sister what it was, but she only directed me to get a cloth piece and use it to contain the flow. She did not explain anything," said Nisha.

It was a scary experience for Nisha who had no idea what was happening in her



The persistent efforts and awareness classes run by Shringika Rao, have made the girl students of Brahmpur upper primary school to switch from using a cloth to sanitary pads.

body. No one had spoken to her about the changes that happen at puberty.

Nisha continued using cloth till she got enrolled in Brahmpur Upper Primary School in Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh, where she met her teacher, Shringika Rao. It was the first time a confused Nisha was explained about menstruation and physical changes during puberty, by her teacher.

Rao also gave the young girl a sanitary pad and showed her how to use it. “Most of the girls here use cloth instead of sanitary pads. They also did not know how to keep themselves clean and the importance of changing the menstrual cloth frequently,” said Rao, who teaches grade VI, VII, and VIII students at the upper primary school.

“I tell them about the infections they can get if they are not hygienic, and how that can lead to serious health problems. I even

tell them about how best to wash the cloth and keep it clean,” the teacher added.

It’s been three years since Rao has been taking ‘exclusive’ classes for the girl students of the school. After she assigns class work to the boys, Rao takes the girls from classes VI, VII and VIII to another classroom where she educates them about puberty, menstrual hygiene, and also good-touch-and-bad-touch. These are the topics that are often spoken in hushed tones in rural India and Rao is trying to inform and educate the village girls.

“I try to talk to them the same way I discuss things with my own daughter,” the teacher said. “I teach them to make a solution with neem leaves boiled in water, and ask them to clean themselves and their period cloth with this,” she added.

“I tell them about the right and wrong touch. How they should be aware when



Shringika Rao tells her girl students about the right and wrong touch, and to be aware when they are closer to their male peers.

they are closer to their male peers. My mother is also a teacher and we never had such barriers. I share the same bond with my daughter too. I openly speak to her about sex for her to understand her hormonal changes and how she is to respond to it," the teacher said.

"Our ma'am said that we shouldn't shy away from talking about periods and should discuss it more openly," said Anjali, who now knows how to take care of her menstrual health. "I boil the neem water and store it in a clean bottle. I use this throughout my periods to clean myself. Also, I now know that one should change the sanitary pads three to four times in a day," said the teenager.

Rao has taken the menstrual health awareness campaign to include the mothers of the girls too. "I have studied till class V and we were never taught about these things in school. The result is we hardly

knew how to handle our bodies when the periods arrived," said Savita Giri, whose two daughters, Sanjana and Chandani, study in class VII and class VIII respectively. "I also suffered from an infection once and had to see a doctor for the same," she added.

Rao's efforts to spread awareness on menstrual health has helped Suman Choudhary, the ASHA in Brahmipur.

"I go from door to door to educate people to use pads instead of dirty clothes during periods. I also tell them about how it can result in cervical cancer but it takes time to bring a change especially when many can't afford sanitary pads," said Choudhary.

The ASHA worker acknowledged that the teacher's 'special classes' could be the catalyst to speed up the awareness about menstrual health amongst the women in the village. □

STORY 72

Creating a level playing field for underprivileged civil service aspirants

Having taken voluntary retirement from the Indian Administrative Service, Arun Kumar provides free coaching to civil service aspirants at the ghats of Ganga in Patna, Bihar. Most of the students are from rural Bihar, children of either farmers or workers in private firms.



PHOTOS: RAHUL JHA

RAHUL JHA
PATNA, BIHAR

THERE IS A rustle as 30 or so young people make themselves comfortable, seating themselves on newspapers spread on the ground, near Gandhi Ghat in Patna. These students of

Patna University congregate there every evening with notebooks and pens for free classes. Their teacher is Arun Kumar who expounds on the current political and economic scenario of the country.

Most of the students are from rural Bihar, children of either farmers or workers in



It was thanks to his father's investment in his education that helped Arun Kumar crack the IAS, he said. But, he had decided that ultimately, he would start teaching.

private firms. They are trying to crack the toughest exam – to enter the civil services – with Arun Kumar, a retired officer of the Indian Administrative Services (IAS), as their 'teacher'.

"My father is a farmer and all I dreamed of was a job that would make our lives easier," said Nishant Kumar, who is from Samastipur. "In August 2022, I heard about the free coaching classes for the civil services exams that were being given on the Ganga Ghat, and I joined in," he added.

Ever since, the young man has been diligently preparing for the civil services under the mentoring and tuition of Arun Kumar.

Coaching classes for civil services is very expensive. Realising this, Arun Kumar, who is in his 50s took premature voluntary retirement from the Indian Administrative Services in 2018. The former IAS officer is from the 1995 batch. He was with the

Defence Ministry and also served as director at the Central Vigilance Commission.

Post voluntary retirement, Arun Kumar devoted himself to social service in Sitamarhi district. And, in January 2022, he began to coach students free of cost on the banks of the Ganges, to appear for the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) and the Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC) examinations.

In May 2022, he also set up a paid coaching academy called Ashoka Civil Services in Patna, where about 65 students are enrolled.

"There are hundreds and thousands of students in Bihar who cannot afford to study because of their abject poverty. I am trying to prepare at least some of them," said Arun Kumar. Those who have the money move to Delhi or other places to be coached. "I want those students who cannot afford expensive coaching classes

to have a shot at it,” he added.

“The abysmal condition of education in the backward areas of the state is not hidden from anyone, and for students from rural schools, attempting the competitive exams is a challenge. But if the students have a command over whatever they have learnt from classes six to 10, write well and are proficient in general knowledge, I can try and fan that spark in them,” he said.

The students discuss current affairs with their teacher on the ghat of the Ganga every single day. “He believes that analysing news and current affairs can help us effectively tackle the questions in the general knowledge paper of the exam,” said Prabhat from Musallahpur Haat in Saharsa district, one of the students who is an aspirant.

Besides current affairs, the students discuss history, economics, political science, and anything else that is relevant to study, with their teacher.

Talking about his own childhood and youth, Arun Kumar recalled how his village Narkatya in Sitamarhi district had no school of its own. His father had teachers from schools in other villages staying with them at their home, so that his children could also learn something from them.

“My father was a graduate of Patna University and he wanted his children to study as well. He made sure we listened to BBC radio broadcasts,” said Arun Kumar reminiscing.



The students discuss current affairs with their teacher on the ghat of the Ganga every single day.

It was thanks to his father’s investment in his education that helped Arun Kumar crack the IAS, he said. But, he had decided that ultimately, he would start teaching.

The free coaching classes have been moving from one Ganga ghat to another, said Manchit Kumar, who takes care of the administrative work for Arun Kumar.

“In the beginning the classes were held at Barharwa Ghat, then it moved to Krishna Ghat but had to move from there too as there was some work being undertaken on the riverfront,” said Manchit. Now the classes are held at Gandhi Ghat.

When the BPSC preliminary test results were announced in November 2022, there were 15 students of Arun Kumar who had trained under him on the banks of the Ganges, who cleared it. □

STORY 73

A school teacher has planted nearly 5 million trees and inspired a generation of students

Popularly known as Triveni Baba, a government school teacher for nearly 30 years, Satyavan has taken it upon himself to teach his students the larger lesson of keeping the planet green and healthy.



PHOTOS: AMARPAL SINGH VERMA

AMARPAL SINGH VERMA

THOUGH THE NAME he was given at birth was Satyavan, people in Haryana know him better as Triveni Baba.

Satyavan, who was born in Bisalwas

village in Loharu tehsil in Bhiwani district, Haryana, was profoundly impacted by Swami Vivekananda's teachings. "Swami Vivekanand Ji had said that at least do one meaningful and beneficial thing in your life, and for me becoming a teacher was one path to doing that," said Satyavan.



Satyavan does not stop at tree planting, but also tells his students to be prudent about water usage.

Satyavan believes that as a teacher he could mould a generation of children who would take the country to great heights. And he has set an example through his love for trees.

Fifty-seven-year-old Satyavan has so far planted about five million trees of which nearly 100,000 are Neem, Peepul and the Banyan. He has also built platforms around the trees so that people can sit there under the shade of their branches. He has also provided for bird feeders.

Panchayats, schools, hospitals, cemeteries in Haryana now have trees planted either by him or by those who have been inspired by him. And his green mission covers not just Haryana, but also other states such as Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

“I thought it necessary to plant as many

trees as possible for the good of the environment and I started with Saral village where I was first posted. Soon after this, it became a mission for me as I travelled from village to village planting saplings and encouraging others to do so too,” the teacher said. “Ever since, till today not a day has gone by when I have not planted a sapling,” he added.

Satyavan did his Bachelors of Arts and followed that up with a Bachelors in Education in order to pursue his dream of becoming a teacher. In 1991 he got a government job as a trained graduate teacher and his first posting was Saral village in Tosham Block, Bhiwani, in the government high school there. He taught Social Sciences to the students of high school till February, this year.

Since then, he has been working at the Bhiwani education department as an eco-coordinator. A part of his job

involves visiting schools and colleges and enthusing young people to plant more trees and safeguard the environment.

In 1994, Satyavan went on a mission of planting tree saplings across the state. He began by planting the triveni or triumvirate of Neem, Banyan and Peepal trees at the village cemetery. Hence his name Triveni Baba.

The Peepal, Neem and Banyan are considered to be the triumvirate of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, said Satyavan. “When planted together they are beneficial not just spiritually, but also environmentally. They are all long lasting trees that provide shelter and sustenance to many birds and small animals,” he added.

When he began planting trees, Satyavan would encourage people to plant saplings to commemorate heroes, martyrs and other famous personalities.

“But soon, I asked them to plant saplings in the names of their own ancestors, on the occasion of weddings and birthdays in their families, and so on,” said the government teacher.

According to him, that has become the norm rather than the exception in the villages he has travelled to. The village people plant saplings on all special occasions and also distribute them to others.

“I have not married and my life is devoted to the trees, which are my family,” the

57-year-old teacher said. Satyavan spends his entire salary on buying saplings. Sometimes local inhabitants buy saplings and hand it over to him to propagate.

The saplings keep coming. “Baba is never short of them. Neem saplings are available in government nurseries, and Peepal and Banyan saplings come from nurseries in Saharanpur, Bhiwani and Tosham,” said Raj Singh, a retired soldier and a former student of Satyavan.

Bhonduram who is now working in the Water Works at Saral village was also a student of Satyavan. “I was perhaps in class six or seven when Baba began his planting of saplings. Ever since all of us who have studied under him have followed in his footsteps and taken forward tree planting in our respective villages,” he said.

“I planted 500 saplings when my father passed away. At my nephew’s wedding we planted nearly 700 saplings. Most of us have started doing this now,” said Bhonduram.

Satyavan is currently on a mission of planting saplings to commemorate the lives of 26, 945 martyrs. He began doing it in December 2022. The initiative was started in Chandimandir in Chandigarh at the Indian Army’s Western Command Headquarters. □

STORY 74

For the love of art and Nanpur village

Noted artist and writer Prafulla Mohanti has kept his village in Odisha alive through his paintings and books. The 87-year-old, who has British citizenship, has set up an art and culture centre in his village Nanpur in Jajpur district.



PHOTOS: ASHIS SENAPATI

ASHIS SENAPATI

NANPUR (JAJPUR) ODISHA

PRAFULLA MOHANTI RELISHES nothing more than teaching children art. The noted 87-year-old writer, artist and urban planner, who was born in the picturesque Nanpur village, holds a British citizenship and

lives in London, but spends time between November and March in his village in Jajpur district of Odisha.

Sitting around him on a white sheet spread out on the floor, children pay close attention to Mohanti who sits on a bench and paints on an easel. He has set up the art class in his two-storied home in Nanpur.



Sitting around him on a white sheet spread out on the floor, children pay close attention to Mohanti who sits on a bench and paints on an easel.

Smita Behera, a 14-year-old, shyly says how she enjoyed the class. “Prafulla Sir is an icon for us,” she said.

For Mohanti, nothing gives him greater pleasure than teaching the young people of his village.

“They are wonderful kids. I love them, and they love me. They always do their best, and I want to be doing this till my last breath,” said Mohanti.

The Sahitya Akademi conferred the Honorary Fellowship on Prafulla Mohanti on 15 November 2022, at a function in New Delhi. This is the highest honour conferred by the Academy on literary persons of outstanding merit who are not nationals of

India. The other stalwarts in his company are professor Michael J. Hutt who received the honour in 2021, and Sir V.S. Naipaul who got the Honorary Fellowship from Sahitya Akademi in 2010.

Mohanti wears the honour lightly. “Putting a smile on the faces of children by teaching them to paint is the real reward for me,” he said.

“My initiation into the world of art and learning was at the village school. I was three years old, and the teacher took my right hand that was holding a thick clay chalk, and helped me draw three perfect circles supposed to represent the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar. That is how my life as an artist and writer began,”

smiled Mohanti.

For the artist and author, his village culture is a source of great inspiration. He set up an arts and culture centre at Nanpur 25 years ago. “I remember learning how to paint on the walls of my home with rice flour, from my mother. I want this centre to teach children the arts, be it painting, dance, music...,” he said.

“I have been trying to revive the dying arts of wandering singers, story tellers, puppeteers, and other arts and crafts through the centre in Nanpur. I organised art festivals here and trained budding artists here and from nearby villages. We teach singing, painting, dancing, puppetry and other art and crafts in the centre. I also provided five computers ten years back to the art centre,” he said.

“I was educated by the people of this village, and this is what I owe to them. I have nothing else to achieve in life. My only goal is to help my people,” said Mohanti.

Mohanti is very proud of his origins. Through his books *My Village, My Life: Portrait of an Indian Village*, *Changing Village, Changing Life*, *Indian Village Tales* and other books and paintings, he has kept his village, Nanpur, alive.

Mohanti has held more than 60 exhibitions in Europe, America, Japan, and of course India. Mohanti went to England in 1960 after graduating as an architect from Bombay’s J.J. School of Art. He got



For Prafulla Mohanti, nothing gives him greater pleasure than teaching the young people of his village.

a post-graduate diploma in town planning at Leeds University in 1964.

“Prafulla Sir has lived a long and happy life. He has set such a positive example to others. He has taught painting and provided education and other kinds of help to many of the poor children of our village and other villages nearby,” said Natabar Mallick, a 65-year-old resident of Nanpur.

“It’s people like Prafulla Sir who show us the way. I am sure there are many more Prafulla Sirs in the country whose work is never reported but they continue to serve the people,” said Ajay Jena, a music teacher at the art and culture centre. □

STORY 75

A teacher brings glory to the Mewati language

A government school teacher in a village in Bharatpur, Rajasthan composes poetry and songs in Mewati language to increase public awareness about ills in society. His aim is to promote harmony amongst the common folk through his melodies and verses.



PHOTOS: RAJESH KHANDELWAL

RAJESH KHANDELWAL
BHARATPUR, RAJASTHAN

NANAK CHAND SHARMA Navin, a government school teacher, has been garnering fame and glory. Not only is he a published author,

poet and musician, but he has, through his music, shone the spotlight on his school students too.

Nanak Chand, who has been teaching since 1986, is a poet, and has been composing songs and poems in Mewati language.



Nanak Chand is presently the principal of the State Higher Secondary School in Pipalkheda in Bharatpur district.

His aim is to promote harmony amongst the common folk through his melodies and verses. At present, he is the principal of the State Higher Secondary School in Pipalkheda in Bharatpur district.

“I have been reading and writing verse since I was in the ninth standard. It is a god given gift,” said Nanak Chand who turns 60 soon. He grew up in Kaithwara village in Pahari tehsil of Bharatpur district. He completed his M.A and B.Ed in Bharatpur, too.

“My father Gopal Prasad Sharma was a teacher too and very fond of music and it is from him that I learnt to love it so much,” he added.

Nanak Chand’s father had started the tradition of performing the Ramlila in the village and the teacher-cum-poet is now doing the same. Nanak Chand is well versed in playing the dholak, drums, harmonium and

flute, he said.

Mewat region that covers both Rajasthan and Haryana, and where Nanak Chand is a teacher, comes with a unsavoury reputation of corruption, cheating, online frauds and so on. But, while it may take a while to set right such a negative image of the area, the school principal is trying to dispel the unsavoury reputation with songs and poems that he has composed in Mewati language.

Last year, at the Rajiv Gandhi Rural Olympic Games organised by the government of Rajasthan, Nanak Chand’s songs were sung by Kshama Yadav and Rakhi Yadav, students of classes 12 and 11 respectively from his school. Rajasthan’s information and public relations department also promoted these songs.

Nanak Chand has also written and published five books including a collec-

tion of poetry in Hindi, a book on 1,000 dohas in Mewati language, and a collection of ghazals.

The principal has worked hard to find and shine the spotlight on the talent in his own school. In 2018, when he was a teacher at the Higher Secondary School at Piprauli, two of his students, Shabana and Muskan had sung his song in Mewati language and it had become hugely popular.

The song, *Booth Pe Mein Akeli Chali Jaoongi...* was composed by him for the Election Commission of India's voter education initiative, SVEEP (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation program). The video of this song was shown to Sandesh Nayak, the then district collector, by Ashok Kumar Singh, who was then additional district project co-ordinator of Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan, and the in charge of the SVEEP programme in Bharatpur.

In 2020, during the pandemic, Nanak Chand composed a song on COVID-19. Called, *Bataa De Mai Sanchi Sanchi, Bairi Corona Su Kaise Pade Paar*, the Pipalkheda school students Kshama and Rakhi and Piprauli school students Shabana and Muskan sang it together, and it became very popular.

"We are proud that the song in our Mewati language became so popular, and that we received so much appreciation for it," said Kshama, one of the students.

On January 26, 2019, the Bharatpur district

In 2020, during the pandemic, Nanak Chand composed a song on COVID-19. The Pipalkheda school students Kshama and Rakhi and Piprauli school students Shabana and Muskan sang it together, and it became very popular.

administration honoured Nanak Chand and his students Shabana and Muskan in recognition of his services. Then again, earlier this year on January 26, 2023, he and his students Kshama and Rakhi were honoured by the district administration.

"Nanak Chand Navin and his students have done immense work in bringing about awareness about schemes and initiatives of the government and the education department, and from the department's side we will do all we can to encourage their contribution," said Prem Singh Kuntal, Deputy Director of Bharatpur's education department. ■

STORY 76

Rural teachers double up as YouTubers in their efforts to spread education

Gaon Connection introduces you to rural government school teachers who are tech savvy and digital comrades in the education space. They have their own YouTube channels through which they are spreading the joy of learning.



GAON CONNECTION

IT WAS DURING Gaon Cafe, a LIVE show on Gaon Connection's YouTube channel, Vimalwani Dubey, a teacher from a primary school, mentioned she had her own YouTube channel. A rural teacher in

a village in Mandsaur district of Madhya Pradesh who is a YouTuber!

She regularly uploads educational and informative videos on her YouTube channel, which are popular with village children and their parents, many of whom



Teachers have taken to YouTube to achieve a greater reach for their teaching techniques in the hope of benefitting students beyond the confines of their classrooms.

are farmers or daily wage workers! Dubey said that the majority of the videos on her YouTube channel were shot and recorded by her students who studied in class 1-5!

Dubey is not the lone example of a teacher who is also a YouTuber. A number of teachers from village schools have their own YouTube channels.

Science experiments, mathematical hacks, DIY activities, magic shows, street plays, and more – these rural teachers are leaving no stone unturned to spread education and knowledge digitally in remote parts of the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic further encouraged many of these teachers to build their YouTube channels so that the digital divide between rural and urban children was bridged.

Sanjeev Sharma is a principal at the upper Primary School Rajmargpur, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh (UP). He enjoyed a celebrity

moment when he got off the train at the state capital Lucknow.

“A woman asked for a selfie with me. I asked her who she was and the response made me feel elated,” the 45-year-old teacher said. She was a ‘fan’ who followed Sharma’s YouTube channel. Be it a ‘100 Days of Reading Campaign’ or ‘NIPUN Vaarta’, Sharma has been experimenting with his channel and treats it like an archive for future generations.

Rakhi Agarwal is an assistant teacher at the Composite School Janaita, Sambhal, UP. She has devised a new way to keep her third-graders engaged and motivated to perform better in the class. “I announce that whoever does the best activity, I will record their video on YouTube,” she said. And the results are promising.

“The children are so keen that they check with me every day about the comments, likes and subscribers of our YouTube channel,” the teacher laughed. Her digital

revolution is allowing her students to be up-to-date with education-related things.

Awadhesh Pandey is the headmaster of the Upper Primary School, Karpiya, Barabanki, UP. He is passionate about using magic shows on his YouTube channel. The quality of education in his school and student's interest in studies have improved multifold ever since he launched the channel.

"Students want the teachers to come up with new ways of teaching them. Magic shows are very popular amongst students," said Pandey.

Vipin Upadhyay is an assistant teacher at the Primary School Amkheda, Jalaun, UP. His YouTube channel is a space for cross-region learning and at the same time making his students camera-savvy.

"I have told them that the mobile must be held horizontally, and it should not be titled," said the teacher. His students have turned into videographers who are often behind a mobile's camera recording his lessons as he teaches them.

Shivani Singh is an assistant teacher at the primary school in Gangapur, Mirzapur, UP. Her attempt to create a YouTube channel is to show a wider audience, what was unfolding in rural hinterlands. Involvement of the parents in her digital ride, worked wonders in strengthening her bond with them. "They tell me that it is the trust they have in me, that they continue sending

their wards to the school. That is what I have earned," said Singh.

Vaibhav Chaudhary is an assistant teacher at the Primary School Kasampur Veeru Khalsa in Bijnor, UP. He is interested in technology and his passion for video editing led to the launch of his YouTube channel.

"Apart from students and teachers, parents and guardians also watch my YouTube channel. It helps them keep a tab on what and how their child learns," said Chaudhary.

Anjali Tomar is an assistant teacher at Primary School Alawalpur in Ballia, UP. Her videos demonstrate innovative teaching techniques and she primarily focuses on live streaming and recording the classroom sessions. "The biggest advantage of my YouTube channel is that it has become a digital archive of my classroom innovations and experiments," she said.

Rakesh Vishwakarma is an assistant teacher at Model Composite School in Sanaiya Jatt, Rampur, UP. He believes that constant engagement with the viewers in the comment section of his YouTube channel is something that increases his expanse as a teacher.

"I keep the notifications on the comment section of my channel and I try to reply to the queries of the students as well as the teachers as promptly as I can. It helps me build a community of learners and teachers," said Vishwakarma. ■

STORY 77

From cruise ships to trains, a teacher is on a mission to give schools a facelift

To make the learning environment attractive for the students in Rajasthan, a teacher mobilises public funding and gives schools an unusual makeover.



RAJESH KHANDELWAL
BHARATPUR, RAJASTHAN

STANDING ON THE deck of the 'Education Cruise', Megha Meena, a student of class 12th of the Government Upper Secondary School in Alwar district's Haldina village, looked pleased as punch. After all, how many students of his age could boast about their

school being built like a ship!

"Our smart classes are held at the upper portion of the ship and we study there using modern technology on a projector," said Meena, a 18-year-old student. "Even neighbouring villages know all about our 'ship school,'" she grinned.

Elsewhere, in Alwar's Railway Colony's Upper

Secondary School, Bhoomika, a class eight student is excited that the school's corridors resemble a train. "I am thrilled to be studying in a school that is so unique," she said.

The school buildings where Meena and Bhoomika study are the product of the imagination of Rajesh Lavnaiya, a 57-year-old engineer in the education department of Rajasthan who was a primary school teacher from 1992-2008.

When Lavaniya landed his first job as a primary school teacher in Dhaneta village in Rajasthan's Alwar district in 1992, he already held a diploma in civil engineering that he had completed in 1988. It was his background in engineering that inspired him to refurbish schools and classrooms in his district.

"The condition of the school building where I first came to work was appalling and I couldn't imagine any child ever wanting to go to such a school every day," said Lavaniya. "I resolved to transform the face of the school and provide the children a far more attractive ambience to learn in," he added.

He has designed a school in Alwar to look like a train and a railway platform. In Indergarh village, Alwar district, the school looks like an aeroplane, while in Haldina village, in the same district, another school is a two-storeyed cruise ship. In total, 12 schools in Alwar district are either painted or modified in the form of cruise ships, trains and aeroplanes.

From being a teacher to being an engineer



Lavaniya was able to embark on his mission to make not just the school he worked in, but other schools better learning spaces too, because in 2008, he was appointed as a junior engineer under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan which is a central government scheme to ensure every child in India has access to education.

"Now, I could involve myself in refurbishing the schools. Some of the schools I had visited were below par, with some of them not even having toilets," said Lavaniya. "In some schools, the children had to use a lane outside to relieve themselves. Other children had to stand guard at either end of the lane to ensure no one passed through while the children were using it," he recalled.

Lavaniya set about repairing, reconstructing and repainting school walls and classrooms. He had inspirational quotes painted on the walls. In the last 15 years or so he has transformed the way 500 government schools across Rajasthan look. He has planted gardens, created playgrounds, and made the educational institutions colourful, attractive and conducive to teaching and learning. He said about 12 schools a year are refurbished. □

STORY 78

A police thana turns into a centre for learning for rural children in Panna, MP

Sub inspector Bakhat Singh Thakur has set up a library – Vidyadan Pustakalay – at Brijpur Thana to promote education among children of nearby villages in Panna district of Madhya Pradesh. The police station also regularly holds sports events and awareness drives.



PHOTOS: ARUN SINGH

ARUN SINGH

BRIJPUR (PANNA), MADHYA PRADESH

EVERY MORNING, NAMRATA Patel, who studies in class eight at her village school in Badera, travels eight kilometres to the Brijpur Police

Station in Panna district. Badera is a remote village and Namrata has to walk a stretch to the nearest road head from where she and other children from her village take a bus to reach the police station by 7 AM.

A police station in Brijpur where children



The Brijpur police station has become a favourite hangout for rural children not just in Brijpur but from several villages nearby.

like Namrata and others are headed has become the unlikely hub of learning. They spend two hours engaged in learning here and then return to their villages where some of them then attend their village schools.

The Brijpur police station has become a favourite hangout for the rural children not just in Brijpur but from several villages nearby. And the credit for the same goes to Bakhat Singh Thakur, a sub inspector and the police-in-charge of Brijpur Thana, who has set up a library for village children at his police station.

This centre of learning is called Vidyadan Pustakalay and almost 150 children from nearby villages visit it every day. Before he joined the police force, Thakur was a teacher himself at Bedri village in Rajnagar block of Chhatarpur district.

“On July 9, 2021, I took over Brijpur police station. I was yet to familiarise myself with the warp and weft of the area,” said sub inspector Thakur. It was on a morning cycle ride he was taking around the area

that he saw a woman with a pickaxe and spade on her shoulder, with two children following her. She was obviously a daily wage labourer.

“I casually asked her why her kids were not in school and her response shook me. She said – ‘children from our caste do not have any place to study’. I couldn’t sleep that night and her words kept ringing in my ears,” the sub-inspector recalled.

That chance encounter led to the refurbishing of an old disused building in the precinct that was converted into a library. “I informed Dharamraj Meena, the superintendent of police, Panna, who encouraged and supported me in my intention to convert the building into a place where poor children could come to learn,” the police-in-charge added.

It took five months, but at the end of it the beautiful Vidyadan Pustakalay, a learning centre was ready for action. As a result the Brijpur police station has become the most sought after hangout for the children

from Brijpur and other nearby villages. They gather there to pursue creative activities, completely free of cost.

“Classes are held regularly for children in the primary and secondary levels. They are coached to appear in examinations and there are facilities here for the children to attend online classes too,” said Thakur. The aim is to make the centre more and more useful and up to date with the help of the police force as well as the inhabitants of the area.

Two local youth who gave tuitions for a living have been employed to teach the children and the sub-inspector himself takes a few classes when he has the time to do so in between his other policing duties.

The area around Vidyadan Pustakalay has pleasant gardens, open spaces and a grand old banyan tree under which children can play. Some of the children who frequent Vidyadaan Pustakalay are also being coached to appear in the entrance exam that will help them secure admission at Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya (a system of central schools for talented students predominantly from rural areas in India).

“Shyamu Sir is coaching me and I hope to get admission into Navodaya,” said Rohit Patel, a student of class five from Badera village. He travels eight kilometres every day to get here. “We get textbooks, notebooks, pencils and pens as well as rucksacks to carry them,” said Harsh Yadav, another Navodaya aspirant, who is from

“Many people I know were sceptical about Vidyadaan Pustakalay when we began. There is a tendency amongst people to fear and be wary of the police, which was a challenge for us to dispel”

BAKHAT SINGH THAKUR
POLICE-IN-CHARGE OF BRIJPUR THANA

Dharampur village, close by.

“Many people I know were sceptical about Vidyadaan Pustakalay when we began. There is a tendency amongst people to fear and be wary of the police, which was a challenge for us to dispel,” Thakur said. In order to reassure the people, Thakur began to tour the nearby villages on his cycle.

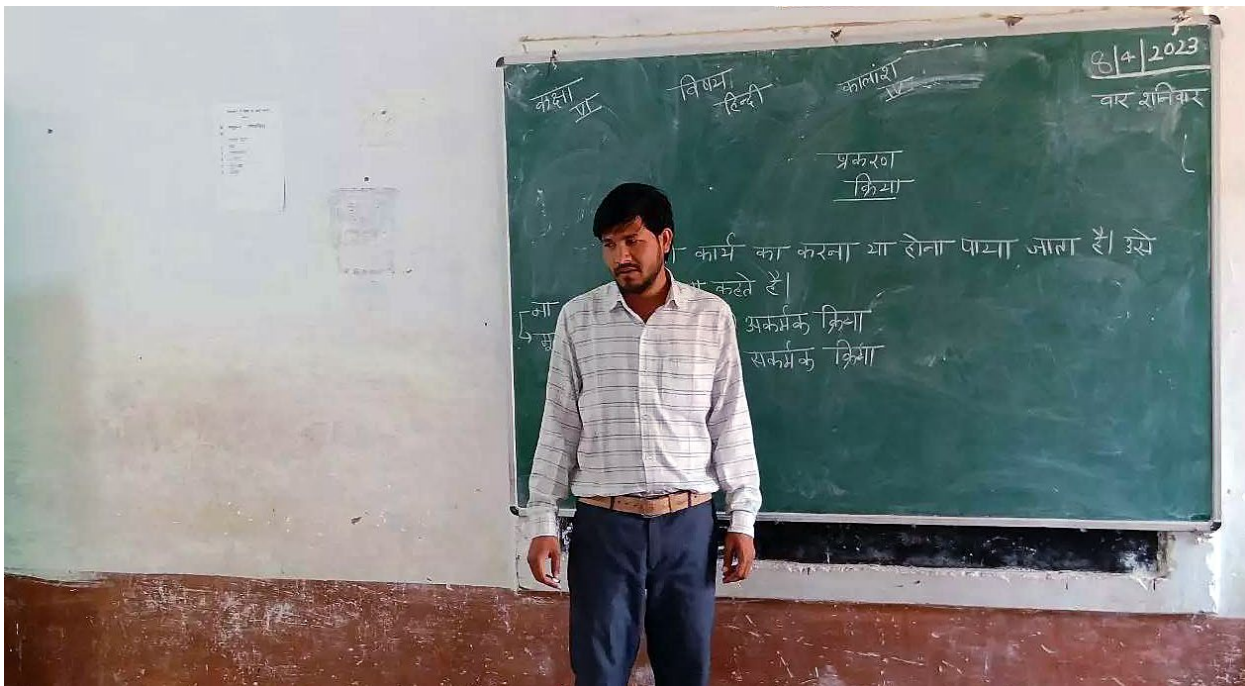
“I visited five to six villages every day, met the inhabitants of the villages and established a relationship of trust and friendship,” the sub-inspector said. According to him, his visits paid off and the village people are more than happy to send their children to Vidyadan Pustakalay. Now, almost 150 children frequent the learning centre every day, he said.

Behind the library is an empty stretch of land that the police station has turned into an organic farm. □

STORY 79

A principal ensures that kids, who sold berries, now study in a school

Mahesh Prajapat, the principal of a government school in a village in Pokhran, Rajasthan brings back students who stayed away from class and provides them with better infrastructure. He regularly counsels parents to send their wards to school.



PHOTOS: KULDEEP CHHANGANI

KULDEEP CHHANGANI

POKHRAN (JAISALMER), RAJASTHAN

MAHESH PRAJAPAT TRAVELS 34 kilometres every morning from his home at Pokhran in Jaisalmer district in Rajasthan to Jaswant-

pura village where he is principal at the Government Upper Primary school, since 2020. The school has classes from one to eight and there are eight teachers.

While today there are about 130 children who come regularly to school, it was not

so when Prajapat first came there. “The biggest challenge before me was to tackle absenteeism. Very few children, no more than 40, attended the school, though there were 110 children who were enrolled,” said the 32-year-old principal.

So, after school hours Prajapat began to visit the homes of the enrolled students to find out why this was so.

“From not completing their homework, to not having proper uniform or shoes, the reasons why the children would not come were many. Many of them either worked in the shops in the village or stood by the highway selling *kair* (a kind of berry grown in the desert landscape),” said the principal.

He began to counsel the parents to send their wards to school and told them the importance of doing so. “With the help of the school staff, we also got shoes for all the children,” he said.

The efforts paid off and today there are about 130 children who come regularly to school, Prajapat said. Some of them, about 20 or so, are new admissions, he said.

Sometimes it is just fear that keeps some children away, said Prajapat. “A student, Pratap Singh, had not come to school for three months. Initially I thought he was ill. But, when days passed without him showing up I went to his home. He was horrified to see me.”

The principal learnt that he had stopped



With the enlisted support of philanthropists and local representatives, the school underwent infrastructure improvements.

coming to school because some homework that had been given to him days ago was still incomplete, so he had not come! “I sat him down and told him he could finish the homework in his own time and no one would say anything to him. Ever since, he has been regular,” he laughed.

Prajapat said that the school was in need of a lot of help in terms of infrastructure. “Lack of toilets etc., was a great deterrent to students, more so to the girls and the women staff,” he pointed out. But, he approached some philanthropists and local representatives of the people, and sought their help.

A new main door to the school was fixed, a tin roof was put up where the children had their assembly in the mornings, ensured supply of clean drinking water through water coolers and constructed toilets for girls. The toilets were put up with the help of the Aditya Birla Group. ■

STORY 80

A rural school teacher has donated blood 88 times and is on a mission to save lives

A teacher in a village school in Nuapada, Odisha has been donating blood for 30 years. He has participated in 400 blood donation camps and organises awareness drives for blood donation.



DARSHAN SHARMA
NUAPADA, ODISHA

WHEN KISHORE PARIDA was just 18 years old and impressionable, he donated blood for the first time in his life. His actions perhaps saved the life of a pregnant woman. That was in 1993, and ever since the school teacher has donated blood 88 times.

Parida is a teacher at the Government

Upper Primary School in Kuliabandha village in Nuapada district, in Odisha. And, he has made it a point to spread awareness on the importance of donating blood.

The 48-year-old Parida teaches Odia, history and geography to the students of classes six, seven, and eight. But his strongest message is around blood donation and saving lives.

“I tell my students about blood donation and

explain what it is all about, and how their action can save precious lives,” he said.

He spreads awareness about blood donation through youth organisations, women’s organisations, social institutions and of course schools and colleges.

His hard work is paying off. “I have been teaching for so many years now and many of my students who are adults now donate blood regularly. My colleagues at school, both teaching and non-teaching staff, donate blood,” said Parida.

The school teacher has participated in more than 400 blood donation camps. He also has motivated many more people to come to the blood donation camps and donate their blood. Parida is often invited to speak to people to assure them how safe blood donation is. “It is important to lead by example. Only if I walk the talk will people believe me,” he said.

Thanks to his efforts, the block education department at Nuapada has also started a Live Blood Bank mission where blood is made available to anyone who is in need.

Parida has been a life member of the Indian Red Cross since 2002. “I get calls every day and night sometimes, requesting blood. I try my best to see that they get the blood and I always tell them that this is a free service and they need not pay anything for it,” he said.

Parida has more than a thousand numbers saved on his phone of donors along with



their blood groups. “The minute I get a call from the blood bank or from someone who needs blood of a certain blood group, I start getting in touch with my contacts,” he said.

According to Parida, the main challenge is ignorance about blood donation: “I have seen relatives of patients running here and there looking for blood, unaware that they themselves can safely donate blood.”

“Many people do not know that the blood in our body is replenished. If they donate their blood, the body makes more blood,” the teacher said.

Parida is on a mission now to get blood separators from the health department and the district administration to be installed in all district hospitals.

“A separator can benefit many more people as it can separate the different components of the blood such as the plasma, white blood cells, red blood cells, platelets, and more,” he said. This would mean better and optimum use of the blood that was donated, the school teacher explained. ■

STORY 81

Music to Their Ears

Coming to school is a treat for the students of the government primary school in Bhavani Dinpur village in Raebareli, Uttar Pradesh as their teacher packs in a lot of music and dance, even as he teaches them.



AMBIKA TRIPATHI

FOR 11-YEAR-OLD Meenakshi, her school is her favourite place on earth, especially since her teacher is Kaushlesh Misra.

“I have great fun in Sir’s class. He teaches us dance. I was shy to dance before, but

not anymore, I can happily dance even in front of a crowd,” she giggled.

Meenakshi studies in class 5 at the primary school in Bhavani Dinpur village, in Raebareli, about 80 kilometres away from the state capital Lucknow. Kaushlesh Misra, their teacher, is helping in the all-rounded development of the students



Kaushlesh Misra's profound passion for dance has evolved into a compelling tool for attracting students to the school.

by making music and dance a part of their regular routine in school.

Recently, a video of the children dancing along with their teacher Misra went viral on social media and was greatly appreciated.

"We were practising for the Independence Day celebrations and our principal Umesh Dwivedi liked our dance and uploaded a video of the practice session," said Misra. Since then the school teacher has received so many calls and messages appreciating the video.

Misra said he was always fond of dance and he has just brought that love into

the classroom. "Fortunately my family supported me. I know many people who felt boys should not dance," he laughed.

As the children dance with him, they are also learning, said Misra. "They learn calculations through the rhythms, through the taal (beats)," he explained.

Misra used dance to attract the children to school. "Usually they would take the Fridays and Saturdays off and not show up in school. So I hit upon the idea of introducing activities based around dance, music, painting, acting and so on, on Saturdays, and gradually the children started attending school on those days," Misra said. □

STORY 82

Periods Talk with Rural Women

A primary school teacher in Bareilly, UP has made it her business to step out of her classroom and help the women in the village understand the importance of menstrual hygiene.



AMBIKA TRIPATHI

TEACHERS HAVE A lasting impact on their students even outside of the school walls. Pushpa Aruna, a teacher at the Primary School at Chanehata village in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, has not just been influencing her students, but also their mothers towards a healthier life.

Anushka is a student of class eleven who

once studied in Aruna's class. The teacher goes house to house in the village along with her classmates, telling them about the use of sanitary napkins.

"I remember Pushpa Madam telling us about menstrual hygiene and I always went home and told my mother about what I had learnt that day. My mother was unaware about the use of sanitary pads," Anushka said.

Aruna realised how many women in the



Following school hours, the teacher would visit women in the villages, educating them about menstrual hygiene and overall well-being.

village were unaware about sanitary pads and basic hygiene during menstruation. “They used cloth, which they rewashed and used again. They dried the washed soiled cloth in some damp dank corner, not in the sunlight, somewhere where others won’t see it. And, once they cannot possibly reuse that cloth anymore, they struggle to dispose of them,” the teacher said.

After school, Pushpa visited women in the villages and told them about menstrual hygiene and wellness. She realised how unhygienic practices were leading to infections and other health problems in them.

“Rare is a woman in a village who worries about her own well being. And, menstruation for her is associated with something shameful, to be hidden and talked about in whispers,” the teacher said.

She began by distributing pads to the

village women, but soon realised that she could not continue doing that indefinitely. “The women do not have money to buy pads outside. So, I taught the women to make their own pads. This way they were in charge of their own menstrual health,” Aruna said. The women learnt to make sanitary pads with old cloth they had at home along with wads of cotton.

Aruna had to face a lot of flak for her involvement in this mission of ‘periods’ talk in the village. “People made fun of me, ridiculed me and even criticised me, but I knew I had to do something for the health of the women,” she said.

Aruna also teaches the women and their daughters about ‘good touch’ and ‘bad touch’ to keep themselves safe. For her, being a teacher extends way beyond her classroom. “A teacher should make a contribution to society in other ways too,” she said. ▣



SECTION 8

EDUCATE. ENABLE.
EMPOWER.

**THERE ARE EDUCATORS AND SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS WHO ARE LEAVING
NO STONE UNTURNED TO ENSURE CHILDREN FROM ECONOMICALLY WEAK AND
MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES RECEIVE EDUCATION**



STORY 83

No timetable at 'Gurukulam'

What started off as an open-air classroom under a tree for five students in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, is now a school that has 150 students.

AMBIKA TRIPATHI

NEHA RAJPUT, A 15-year-old student of class 10 at Gurukulam School in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, would be the envy of students in other schools. "I don't have to follow any timetable and I can pick and choose the subjects I want to study," said Rajput.

Gurukulam, which has classes one to 10, was founded by 24-year-old Uddeshya Sachan in 2019, and he wanted to make the school learning interesting and interactive for its students. "I started off with a marker and a whiteboard under a tree with five students but soon my teaching got popular and today I have a building for my school," said Sachan.

“When I was a child studying at school, my mother was ill and my father, who was a tailor, couldn’t afford to pay my fees and I was expelled from school. I could never forget that,” Sachan, who graduated in Philosophy from University of Lucknow, added. He said he still remembered vividly the unpleasant negativity and trauma he felt at the school when he was there.

“I believe that no child in this world can study a subject in the fixed hours in a schedule. A child’s mind is very efferescent and it is constantly intrigued by multiple concepts and observations. Such a mind will function at its best when it has the choice to do what it wants to do at a given time,” Sachan explained the philosophy of Gurukulam.

Students at Gurukulam enjoy learning at the school. “The previous school I was at was tough. I didn’t like the strict teacher there. Now that I am allowed to study at my own time and pace, I understand things with far more clarity. I am not shy of asking questions,” said Priya Sahni, a student of class 10 at Gurukulam.

Apart from Sachan, there are three more teachers at Gurukulam. The students come from economically challenged homes and they are not charged a fee. The funding of the school is raised from charitable donations. “Today we have 150 students,” Sachan said proudly.

Social media was a large part of his school gaining fame and generous public support



Gurukulam, which has classes one to 10, was founded by 24-year-old Uddeshya Sachan in 2019.

and donations helped the school to keep running. Actor R Madhavan gave a boost to the school’s popularity when he shared Sachan’s video on Instagram.

“We were very happy. Our video went viral. People noticed our work and many donors came forward to provide financial support. It made me realise the power of social media,” said Sachan. For him, being able to extend the fruits of education to students belonging to the underprivileged sections of the society is the biggest motivator. ■

STORY 84

Shiksha Rickshaw Abhiyan is spreading smiles and education

The Shiksha Rickshaw Abhiyan, started by two young engineers in NOIDA, Uttar Pradesh, has propelled children of construction labourers towards learning.



LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

AT 10 AM every morning, there is a buzz in several sectors of NOIDA in Uttar Pradesh. Groups of children gather at various points and an autorickshaw trundles by and picks them up. Along with them are volunteers and teachers who move around between 10 AM and 12 noon, then find an open space somewhere, in a park or under a

tree, where they set up a temporary classroom for the 46 or so children in the age group six-12 years.

This is the Shiksha Rickshaw Abhiyan on the move. The Shiksha Rickshaw Abhiyan is the brainchild of Rahul Pandey and Vikash Jha who may not be qualified teachers but are determined to teach and transform the lives of children of construction labourers.



The Shiksha Rickshaw Abhiyan is the brainchild of Rahul Pandey and Vikash Jha who may not be qualified teachers but are determined to teach and transform the lives of children of construction labourers.

The Shiksha Rickshaw is an initiative of their non-profit, Bhavishya, that they set up in 2013. Jha, a software engineer, is from Madhubani, Bihar and works in a private company in Noida. Rahul Pandey is from Uttarakhand. He is a mechanical engineer and is currently working as a government official in the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports in Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh.

In 2013, Jha and Pandey saw a few children begging near the Sai Mandir in Noida, Sector 61. Classmates since college, the engineering graduates thought of teaching these kids (who pick wastes when they are not begging), and bring change into their lives. And, Bhavishya their non-profit was born in 2013.

Bhavishya has become the lifeline of more than two thousand children, and now, after 10 years, the non-profit has five teaching centres in various sectors in Noida, and in West Bengal, and Bihar. It began with

distributing books and stationery to the children, in the hope they would get motivated to study.

“It was not an easy task to motivate the slum kids to start studying. We visited them on weekends and gave them colourful pens and books to encourage them to study,” said Jha. Initially, the response was poor but slowly the number of children increased, he recalled.

More recently, in March 2023, Jha and Pandey were in Noida sector 118, when they came across children playing at a construction site. They were the children of the daily wage labourers who were working there. Jha and Pandey learnt that the children did not go to school. They were not even familiar with the concept of a school.

A rickshaw was co-opted to help out and the Shiksha Rickshaw Abhiyan was launched. The new rickshaw was bought and custom-



Jha and Pandey have taken it upon themselves to get some of the children at least admitted into nearby government schools.

ised into a makeshift moving school. And a call was put out for volunteers.

There are 120 volunteers. Some of them are college students, some are teachers, and some senior citizens. Bhavishya pays most of them a stipend of Rs 3,000 a month. Some of the senior citizens teach gratis.

“We have hired a driver for the rickshaw and pay him Rs 8,000 per month. We have stationed volunteers every one to two kilometres to meet, motivate and teach children from their respective localities to step forward,” said Pandey.

Jha and Pandey have taken it upon themselves to get some of the children at least admitted into nearby government schools. “Since 2016 we have enrolled more than 50 students in government schools and feel that with our collective and consistent efforts we could increase the number,” said Jha.

Another initiative of the non-profit is called ‘Sponsor a Kid’. “A child’s education is sponsored through donation. We coach the students, bring them up to grade and with the help of the donations, get them admitted to government schools.” said Jha.

It is the aim and dream of both Jha and Pandey to open up at least one centre in every district across the country so that they can help the underprivileged kids and encourage their parents to send their kids to school and not waste their future.

“This will eventually give new employment opportunities to these kids who have trusted us and have dreams to pursue. It will also help other kids from underprivileged backgrounds to come up and be a part of Bhavishya and create their own journey of learning new things with us.” said Jha. □

STORY 85

A security guard who runs Roofless School for children of daily wage workers

In this school in Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar in Maharashtra that has no roof, a young teacher enables children of labourers to read and write. A blackboard hung on a neem tree since 2019, is his classroom.



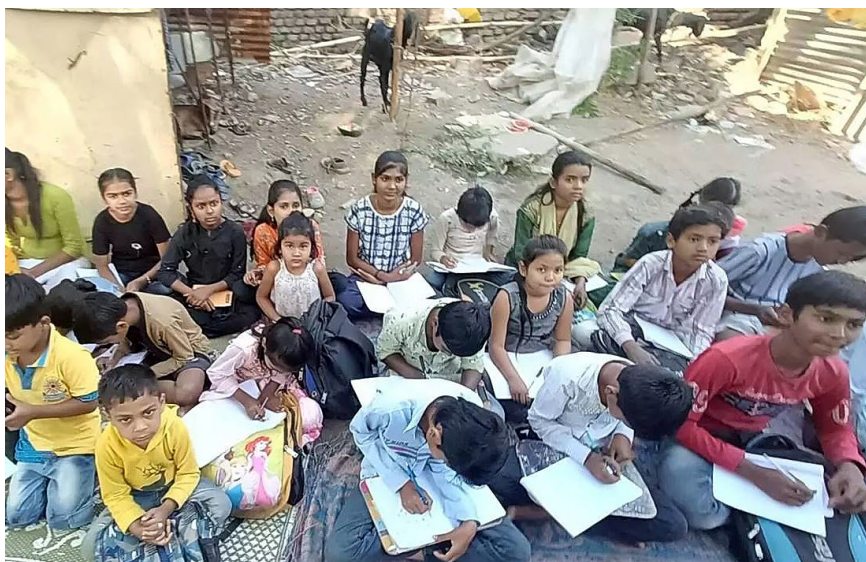
PHOTOS: SUSHEN JADHAV

KOMAL JADHAV

BHAGWAN HIMMATRAO SADAVARTE is a security guard at a multistorey apartment complex in Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar (formerly known as Aurangabad), in Maharashtra. The 29-year-old not only guards the families who live in this complex located

about 250 kilometres from the state capital Mumbai, but is also securing the future of children of daily wage labourers and construction workers.

For the past four years, Sadavarte has been running a 'Roofless School' for the children of daily wage labourers and construction workers. The 'school' is held under a neem



Many of the children who had never held a pen or pencil in their hands, are now speaking, reading and writing English and doing Maths sums.

tree and needs only a blackboard that is hung from the tree trunk.

Today, 74 children, both boys and girls aged between five and ten years, come there to learn. Sadavarte teaches them free of cost and also with his own meagre earnings, buys them textbooks. He takes these classes daily between 6 pm to 8 pm, and such is his popularity that even those children who go to regular schools have started joining in.

“My daughter-in-law works as a housemaid, and my son works as a labourer. Our house doesn’t even have doors, so it was beyond our means to educate the children. But Sir [Bhagwan Himmatrao Sadavarte] teaches all the students in our area for free. They know how to read and write,” said Kamlabai Shinde, a grandparent whose child studies at the Roofless School.

The 29-year-old moved to Chhatrapati

Sambhaji Nagar from Chincholi Sangle village in the neighbouring Buldhana district in 2012, after completing his higher secondary, in order to study further and do his Bachelors. His parents being labourers, they could not finance Sadavarte’s further studies. But that did not come in the way of this youth who worked part time in hotels and private offices to support himself while he studied.

It was four years back, in 2019, as Sadavarte sat in his room in Shakti Nagar, studying, he noticed some young children outside, playing and quarrelling amongst themselves. They ought to have been in school, but were obviously not. Some of them were smoking. These were children who stayed in slums where daily wagers mostly lived.

This disturbed Sadavarte deeply. He figured out that these were the children of daily wage labourers who were out at work to earn a daily living.

He did not meet with much enthusiasm from the parents. They worked all day and they had no time or the energy to devote to anything other than putting food on the table. Many of them were also alcoholics.

But Sadavarte persevered, and gradually many of the labourers came around to his way of thinking. Since Sadavarte did not have much money to put the children into schools himself, he did the next best thing. He hung a black board around the neem tree and thus began his Roofless School in January 2019.

“Sir came to our home and expressed his willingness to teach us. He explained it to our family. Now we come to this school every day. We feel good,” said Ajay Kangare, one of the students. Many of the children who had never held a pen or pencil in their hands, are now speaking, reading and writing English and doing Maths sums.

“My parents didn’t have money for my education. But, three years ago, I started learning under this tree. I didn’t know English before, but now I can read and write in English,” said Sonal Kailas Ugle, a student of class seven.

It isn’t easy teaching and supporting the kids with his meagre earning of about Rs 3,000 a month as a security guard. Since Sadavarte has a place to stay provided by the apartments where he is a security guard and he does not have to pay for his meals, he manages with this and is not

“My parents didn’t have money for my education. But, three years ago, I started learning under this tree. I didn’t know English before, but now I can read and write in English”

SONAL KAILAS UGLE
CLASS SEVEN STUDENT

about to give up.

And, there are those, who seeing the work he puts in, are extending their help. The Mahatma Phule Samata Parishad, a social service organisation, stepped up with five bicycles for those children who have to travel some distance to come here.

Lata Jadhav, a hostel superintendent, has undertaken to provide Sadavarte two meals a day. Surendra Biyani, the Joint Charity Commissioner of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar, was so impressed about the Roofless School that he provided all the students with free health cards.

“By setting up the school, I have done nothing very special. I am only trying to give at least the basics of education to children who otherwise will be left behind. So come rain or sunshine, the Roofless School remains open, and the children keep coming,” Sadavarte smiled. ■

STORY 86

An affordable school for the children of factory workers and labourers

A school in Dabauli, Kanpur has become a ray of hope for daily wage and factory labourers as it imparts education to 450-odd children at fees they can easily afford. Children from nearly 20 kilometres radius come to study there.



MANISH DUBEY

MANISH DUBEY

KANPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

MOST DAILY WAGE labourers spend their lives in squalor and abject poverty in their battered and rickety homes with tarpaulin roofs and cardboard walls, on either side of railway tracks or drains. They work hours

every day in the factories and barely make enough to make ends meet. And, in their struggle to survive each day, educating their children takes a back seat.

But, Prakash Vidya Mandir Inter College, in Dabauli in Kanpur established in 1992, is considered something of a saviour to many families whose children travel from

long distances to study here. The school has classes one to 12.

For as little as Rs 300 a month, the school provides quality education to the children in 500 square yards of space. And children come from areas nearer to it like Dabauli, Dadanagar and Panki, and also nearly 20 kilometres away from areas such as Nauraiyya Kheda. They are all children of labourers.

“We do our best to ensure we do not unnecessarily burden the parents of these children who are already leading hard lives. At the same time we do not want to compromise on the quality of education we provide them,” said RP Singh, the principal of Prakash Vidya Mandir Inter College.

There are 22 teachers who teach in the school and each one of them strives to impart the highest quality of learning to the 450 odd students who study there, the principal said.

“The children travel so far from where they live to study in this school only because we are affordable and because of the education we give them,” said Pankaj Mishra, a teacher at the school. “It is not as if there are no schools where they live. There are plenty of schools but most of them are beyond their means. For us here, it is not the fees that is important, but the fact that education is a Fundamental Right that all children should enjoy,” he added.

Bharat who plies an e-rickshaw has a son who



studies in this school in class two. “There are days I earn not more than Rs 250 and on other days I manage to earn Rs 400. So, putting my son in an expensive school is unthinkable for me,” said Bharat. “In fact, though I pay less fees here, I know that the quality of education here is much better than it is in the more expensive schools,” he added.

The fee-structure of this school has allowed many labourers to dare dream of educating their children. “My husband and I both work in a factory as daily wagers. But we can afford the Rs 600 a month to educate both our children who study here,” said Aradhana Tiwari, who works at the Panni plastic factory.

She and her husband have a daughter who is studying in the school in class three and a younger son who is in class one. “It is no less than a boon to us that we are able to send our children to this school. It is a school that gives people like us hope,” she said.

Rajiv Soni, also a factory worker at a plastic factory, has a nine-year-old son who studies in class three at the school. “Even though I earn very little, it is enough to cover the cost of my son’s education, and I couldn’t be happier about it,” he said. ■

STORY 87

Hunar Ki Pathshala for children of the Korku tribe

The Korku tribal community of Khandwa district in Madhya Pradesh is predominantly migrant labourers and its members have no time or means to educate their children. A community school has managed to bring 4,000 Korku children, who had dropped out of school, back into learning.



SATISH MALVIYA

THERE IS A spot on the way to the pastures, where seven-year-old Savita always stopped and stared. It fell on the way to the place where she and her grandmother took their goats to graze.

Savita is from Mehlu village in Khandwa district in Madhya Pradesh, and she always

made her grandmother stop too and they watched a bunch of children singing, dancing, playing and sometimes reading and writing.

Jyoti Dhurve, a teacher accompanying the children, observed Savita's keen interest in what the rest of the children were doing. One day she approached her and asked her why she was not in school. "I left because



A community school has managed to bring back 4,000 Korku children who had dropped out of school, back into learning.

I was scared I would be hit by the teacher,” the little girl responded.

Dhurve asked her if she would like to join the other children too and soon Savita was able to become one of them. “I will come every single day. It looks like a lot of fun and I also want to study,” she told the teacher firmly. The little girl did not know then that the children she watched with so much longing belonged to a community learning centre called Hunar Ki Pathshala, in Khandwa district catering to 14 villages of the Khalwa Block. It is run by a non-profit called Musht Samaj Seva Samiti that works for the welfare of the Korku Adivasi Tribe.

“Savita belongs to the Korku community. Her parents are migrant labourers. Though she was admitted to a government school in Mehlu village, she left half way,” said Pramila Chauhan, director of the Samaj Seva Samiti. Savita was then taken into the Hunar Ki Pathshala in class two.

“We started Hunar Ki Pathshala in 2014. Since then, we have managed to bring back 4,000 children like Savita who had dropped out of school, back into learning,” said Chauhan.

Samaj Seva Samiti was founded by Tausif Shah. “We started the organisation in 2013 to skill unemployed youth from the Korku community and help them find employment. It did not go as planned as then we did not have enough funds to carry forward the scheme,” said Shah.

Shah and his friends had worked for many years amongst the Korku community and they realised that there was nothing much done for the education of the children of the Korku tribals.

“Lack of education was their biggest handicap, and so we decided to do something about it,” Shah said. So, the following year, in 2014, they set up the Hunar Pathshala to help the community embark on a journey



The children at the Hunar Ki Pathshala are slowly being encouraged to dream and think big.

of learning.

The pathshala has classes one to five with children ranging in ages between six and 14 years. “We taught them to read and write in their own language first. We encouraged them to ask questions, which they had never done before,” he said. There are 600 children from 14 villages in Hunar Ki Pathshala in the Khalwa Block. Twenty community teachers teach them.

“We will groom and support these 600 children till they complete their 12th class,” said Shah.

Chauhan who is from the Korku tribal community said education was almost non-existent in the community. “Because their parents move often in search of jobs, the children are deprived of a steady education,” she said. “The few children who do continue with school do so for the midday meal or the uniforms that are given to them. Education is not a priority

at all,” she added.

It is difficult to persuade and coax the children to dream big, Chauhan said. “The Korku children have no ambitions or dreams. All they know is about the physical labour that their parents do in order to survive. Nothing more outside of that,” she said.

But, the children at the Hunar Ki Pathshala are slowly being encouraged to dream and think big and told that nothing is impossible for them if they set their minds to it.

Chauhan herself has spent several years as bonded labourer, while Shah was once a bike mechanic. Both had the opportunity to work in social organisations such as Goonj and Spandan, which they are bringing to their mission of educating the children of the Korku tribal community. ■

STORY 88

When peers turn teachers to promote girls' education

A Jamshedpur-based non-profit YUVA (Youth Unity for Voluntary Action) has roped in college students to hold free tutorial classes in five villages of East Singhbhum district in Jharkhand to ensure that girls from tribal communities have an opportunity to pursue their education.



PHOTOS: MANOJ CHOUDHARY

MANOJ CHOUDHARY

POTKA (EAST SINGHBHUM), JHARKHAND

IT WAS A watershed event for many young girls in the villages of tribal-dominated East Singhbhum district in Jharkhand. A non-profit organisation based in Jamshedpur, called YUVA (Youth Unity for Voluntary Action), began to hold tutorial classes in the villages of Chakri,

Tangrain, Sidhirsai, Shiling and Jojodih in Potka block, to ensure that tribal girls had the opportunity to pursue their education.

Launched in January 2023, the academic campaign called Peer Tutorial has had a significant impact in rural East Singhbhum.

“YUVA has been conducting classes in the five villages to improve the academic perfor-



YUVA has been conducting classes in the five villages to improve the academic performance of the girls.

mance of the girls. Girls in the age group of six to 18 years attend Hindi, English and Mathematics classes five days a week,” said Arup Kumar Mandal, the head peer tutor. “This helps students who had dropped out for various reasons or could not keep up for lack of mobile phones during the pandemic, etc., catch up,” he added.

Girls in these villages traditionally got the short shrift when it came to education. “They will eventually get married, and an education is of no use to them anyway”, is the reason many parents don’t give importance to their daughters going to school.

Mamta Sardar of Chakri, was one of those young girls who dropped out of school four years ago. “Parents believe that girls should marry and become housewives and that primary and elementary education is more than enough for the daughters,” said the 14-year-old, who is now trying to get admission in Utkarmit Madhya Vidyalaya in Chakri. All thanks to YUVA, she said.

“During the pandemic, many of us did not get mobile phones to attend online classes while the boys did. This made us fall behind, and we could not catch up once schools reopened,” said Nikita Sardar of Chakri, who dropped out of class eight after the COVID pandemic in 2021. She now attends classes as part of Peer Tutorial. These classes are held free of cost for the girl students and YUVA raises funds via donations.

“The Peer Tutorial academic campaign by YUVA has 10 college students, both men and women, acting as tutors. YUVA has hired them from the very villages where they will teach in order to make the girls more comfortable as they are already familiar with their tutors. About 236 girls are benefiting from these classes,” Arup said.

There are about 50 students enrolled in each of the five tutorial centres and more than 20 are now attending their schools regularly, Arup added. He also informed that each of the tutors are paid Rs 6,000



Girls who had dropped out three to four years ago are willing to start studying again.

per month. The class timings are 1 pm to 3 pm, and are held either at village community centres or government schools.

The peer tutorial classes are having an impact and girls are showing marked improvement in their confidence level, say the tutors. “After I started these tutorials, my interest in mathematics has gone up. I practise mathematics for two hours every day,” said Sandhya Karmkar of Tangrain village.

According to tutor Anjali Patra, who is 19 years old and is in the second year of graduation, the girls are often weak in studies not by choice, but by circumstances. “Girls who had dropped out three to four years ago are willing to start studying again, now that they have an opportunity,” she said.

There are several reasons why the girls drop out of school. “Most of the time they are the ones to help their families in farming activities, especially during sowing and harvesting, and therefore they miss school,” said 21-year-old Amarjeet

Khandwal, a tutor in the programme. He teaches at Tangrine village.

Sometimes it is the fear of English and Mathematics that keep the girls away. For example, Puja Kumari and Sandhya Karmkar of Utkramit Madhya Vidyalay in Tangrain feared English and Mathematics respectively and avoided going to school altogether. But, after attending peer tutorial classes, they have gained confidence to go to school regularly.

Initially, parents objected to girls attending these classes, but tutors, who are college going students from the villages, successfully motivated and guided parents about the importance of girls’ education.

“Villagers who were reluctant to send their daughters to the tutorial classes were persuaded by the tutors to send them,” said Suren Sardar, a resident of Chakri. “The tutors convinced them that the girls could make them as proud as their sons could, and educating them was as important,” he added. □

STORY 89

Following his father's footsteps, a retd govt official set up a school for orphans

Inspired by his father who set up the first private school in Budgam, J&K, and educated underprivileged children free of cost, Sayed Abdul Rouf, a retired joint secretary, followed suit by establishing a school in his father's name that provides free education to orphans and poor children.



PHOTOS: SADAF SHABIR

SADAF SHABIR

BEERWAH (KASHMIR), J&K

SYED ABDUL ROUF grew up watching his father, Syed Ali, dedicate his life to teaching underprivileged children for free. So when the joint secretary, Jammu & Kashmir Board of School

Education, retired in April 2020, he set up a school in the memory of his father to educate the children from low-income families and orphans.

Syed Ali Memorial Institute of Education, established in 2000, is located in Beerwah, 27 kilometres away from Srinagar, and



21 kilometres from the Budgam district headquarters.

“I am just following the footsteps of my father, Syed Ali, who started the first private school in Budgam district. In 1943, he started Mazhar Ul Haq, where he taught children in that area, free of cost,” said Rouf. This school has been functioning for the past 80 years and is run by Syed Abdul Latief Bukhari, who is the uncle of the retired joint secretary.

Syed Abdul Rouf established the Syed Ali Memorial School, which sets aside 10 to 15 per cent of its seats for orphaned children, providing them with free education, all in honour of his father’s legacy.

Inspired by his father’s legacy, Rouf founded the Syed Ali Memorial School. Starting from the primary level, the school now offers education up to the higher secondary level. In addition to this, the school has also started a B.Ed college and a nursing college in the area to provide further opportunities for underprivileged students.

Budgam has had poor literacy rates for decades. As per the 2011 census, the literacy rate in Budgam is approximately 56 per cent, the lowest in the Kashmir Valley. For years, children from low-income families and orphans in the area struggled to get an education due to their financial circumstances.



During the admission process, the school assesses the financial stability of the family and offers concessions in fees accordingly.

“Only through education can a person get an idea of right and wrong and know what they want to do with their life. We teach students to become competent, many of them are today in important jobs in different sectors across Jammu and Kashmir,” the retired joint secretary said.

The school reserves 10 to 15 per cent of the seats for orphaned children, who receive education completely free of cost. During the admission process, the school assesses the financial stability of the family and offers concessions in fees accordingly.

Rouf said he was dedicated to providing education to all underprivileged children in the area. The school is open to children across communities and religions.

“I have lost count of how many chil-

dren were educated free in our school. Hundreds of them have been able to study here free of cost and complete their Higher Secondary education,” Rouf said. He is also associated with the Jammu and Kashmir Yateem Trust, a non-profit, which provides free education and shelter to thousands of children.

“It’s only because of this school that I am able to continue my studies. When my father died in 2020, our financial condition was not good, and I thought I would have to discontinue my studies, but it was Syed Abdul Rouf Sir who gave me admission in this school and is providing free education,” said Shahid Hussain Wani, Shoab, a Class 8 student of Syed Ali Memorial School. Before joining Rouf’s school, Shahid used to study at Holy Mission Public School Sail. □

STORY 90

Jeevan Shiksha Pahal – a school for children from tribal communities

The Jeevan Shiksha Pahal School in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh provides a safe space for children belonging to the Gond and Pardhi tribal communities to study and make a life for themselves away from the casteist slurs and discrimination they face at conventional schools.



LARAIB FATIMA WARSI

KAREENA JAGAT, A 21- year-old student, is from a tribal community in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. She said her decision to study at the Jeevan Shiksha Pahal on the outskirts of Bhopal,

changed her life. Jagat’s mother works as a helper in a catering business while her father is a daily wage labourer who digs ditches, etc. She has two siblings.

“In my early childhood, when I studied at a government school, I constantly faced



Jeevan Shiksha Pahal has made learning a happy experience for many children from the Gond and Pardhi tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh.

casteist slurs from both teachers and other students and it made me feel terrible. I couldn't cope with it so I left the government school and came to Jeevan Shiksha Pahal in 2016, where I studied from class eight to class 12," said Jagat, who belongs to the Gond community.

She is 21 years old today and an undergraduate student at the prestigious Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, Karnataka where she studies social science.

Jeevan Shiksha Pahal has made learning a happy experience to many others like Jagat, who come from the Gond and Pardhi tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh. It was in 2005 that the Jeevan Shiksha Pahal began as an informal teaching institution

at a rented location. It came up to provide education to the children of the Gond and the Pardhi tribal communities that are classified as Denotified Tribes. It later moved into its own school building in 2017.

Studying in mainstream schools can be a sorrowful and traumatic experience for the children from tribal communities, said the school's principal, Brajesh Verma. "The family members of our students are mostly rag pickers, beggars and people who do menial jobs for a living. Their children have to face discrimination at the hands of their classmates in the government schools," said Verma.

Kuldeesh Pawar, a student of Jeevan Shiksha Pahal school can vouch for that

too. In 2011, when Kuldeesh Pawar, then 12 years old, and from a forest dwelling community in Bhopal, was enrolled at the local government-run elementary school, he had not anticipated the hatred he faced.

“My classmates there bullied me and looked down on me because I was from a tribal community. It was hurtful,” said Pawar. But in 2018, Pawar found the safe space and learning environment that he craved for in Jeevan Shiksha Pahal School.

“This new school changed my life. Nobody taunted me here about my tribal background. I felt I could do something good in life,” Pawar said. Pawar’s mother is a rag picker while his father drives a trash truck.

Asif, an 18-year-old student from the Pardhi community and a resident of Rajeev Nagar in Bhopal, repeated the same. “I graduated from Jeevan Shiksha Pahal in 2020. The teachers there are extremely supportive and ensure that the children are learning something new everyday. When I came here, I could sense that this is an environment where I can be myself and will not be judged for my identity and the community I belong to,” he said. Asif’s mother, a waste picker, is the sole breadwinner as his father is dead.

The principal said what these children faced in society was disgraceful. “The kind of discrimination and stereotyping that these children deal with is awful. They have constantly been told to go study in their own space and not enter urban, main-

“The kind of discrimination and stereotyping that these children deal with is awful. They have constantly been told to go study in their own space and not enter urban, mainstream localities”

BRAJESH VERMA
PRINCIPAL

stream localities,” he said.

The school provides free education to its students and there are good samaritans who donate to the school annually. The students are provided stationery. “The donations also enable us to help students pay for examination forms,” Verma said.

“Recently we received a donation of Rs 3 lakh from a shipping company based in Mumbai. This money will be used for the students,” he added.

Jeevan Shiksha Pahal provides a learning space with a multilingual approach as it is difficult for the children from the tribal communities to communicate in English or Hindi right away. “Our teachers speak to the students in their language so as to make it easy for them to understand things better. This is possible because most of the teachers we hire are from the same communities as that of the students studying here,” said Verma. ■

STORY 91

Dream School: Where children from slums are encouraged to dream big

An initiative of the Vishalakshi Foundation in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, gives flight to the dreams of underprivileged families by providing them free education.



PHOTOS: MANVENDRA SINGH

DIVENDRA SINGH
LUCKNOW, UTTAR PRADESH

AT 3 PM in the afternoons, most of the residents who live in shanty towns in the area near Janeshwar Mishra Park in Gomti Nagar, Lucknow, are out at work. A majority of

them work as casual labourers in the capital city of Uttar Pradesh.

But inside some of the homes, there is scurrying about as children pack their school bags. The children emerge in ones and twos from their tarpaulin homes and, holding hands, walk about 200 metres



Setting up Dream Schools is one of its key projects of Vishalakshi Foundation, aiming to impart education to underprivileged children.

where their classroom awaits them. Strips of bamboo make up the classroom's walls and the children will sit on bamboo mats on the floor.

This is their Dream School.

Two years ago, in January 2021, in the place where the Dream School stands today was a garbage dump. When Alind Agarwal and his friends came upon it, they undertook to just clean up the area. "We decided to quietly go about cleaning up and not make a big deal of it," said Agarwal.

"We borrowed shovels and brooms and began the work. We worked for three whole days and were joined by the people who lived here and in nearby places, including the children. And, we cleared the area of the garbage," added the 25-year-old.

After the area was cleaned, Agarwal and his companions asked the children who had helped them if they went to school. Most of them said they did not. That is

when the idea of setting up the Dream School came up. It began with three children, and now there are more than 75 children who study there.

It was the Vishalakshi Foundation that made the formation of the school happen. The foundation, based in Lucknow was started in 2019 by Nilay Agarwal in memory of his friend Vishalakshi who had passed away the previous year, in 2018. The foundation is a non-profit which works on the mission of eradicating hunger and promoting literacy in the country.

Setting up Dream Schools is one of its key projects. Besides Lucknow, there are Dream Schools functioning in several places including Gurugram in Haryana, Pulwama in Jammu & Kashmir and Simdega in Jharkhand.

The school is also unique because all the teachers who teach the kids do so free of cost. Most of them are either still students themselves or working somewhere. Yet,



Besides Lucknow, Dream Schools are functioning in Gurugram in Haryana, Pulwama in Jammu & Kashmir and Simdega in Jharkhand.

they take out a couple of days each day to teach the children. Young volunteers are the wind beneath the wings of the children.

“I have a regular 10 am to 6 pm job. Still, I manage to take two hours leave to come and teach the children here. My office colleagues know about this initiative,” said Agarwal. “It is good to be part of an initiative that will give these children a chance to do well in life,” he added.

It does not just stop with taking time off to teach the children. While teachers ensure they learn Hindi, English, mathematics, and art, they also help the children get admission into regular government schools, said Agarwal.

Mansi Singh is doing her Masters in Social Work in Lucknow University. She has been coming to the Dream School for six months now. “I came here for some field work for five days. Before that I was not even aware that there were children like this who were not going to school.

I have been coming here ever since to teach them,” Mansi told Gaon Connection. “The children wait eagerly for me to come and I come here straight after college,” she added.

One of her students is eight-year-old Mohammad Kamil. He lives by the railway line that passes about 50 metres from the Dream School. “I want to be a doctor,” said Kamil.

For Suman, an 11-year-old student, this is her first experience of school. “My father is a bricklayer and my mother works as a domestic help. I have been coming here ever since school started,” she said. “I want to become a teacher too, like my teachers here,” Suman added. □

STORY 92

'Jeevan Shalas' offer education to tribal children in Nandurbar, Maharashtra

A large chunk of the tribal population in Nandurbar migrates seasonally to work as cane cutters. The children are left behind in the villages, in the care of Jeevan Shalas, where teachers educate them and take care of their other needs.



PHOTOS: SATISH MALVIYA

SATISH MALVIYA
NANDURBAR, MAHARASHTRA

THE RURAL POCKETS of tribal dominated Nandurbar seem caught in a time warp. They are remote, far away from motorable roads and very often have no electricity.

In one of these villages, Swarya Digar, located about 100 kilometres away from the district headquarters, children of Bhil adivasi scribble on slates, trying to make the most of the education that is being provided to them at a Jeevan Shala, a local school set up for the children of tribal families affected by the Sardar Sarovar Dam.



The Jeevan Shalas serve as a substitute for the government schools, which the local villagers allege exist only on papers.

“Their parents, who are mostly migrant labourers, feel proud when their children write or speak in Marathi. We provide them primary and secondary education here in this school,” said Rumaal Singh Pawra, a teacher at the Jeevan Shala.

Pawra has taught at the school ever since it was established in 1997. Four such Jeevan Shala function in the Nandurbar district of Maharashtra, a predominantly tribal area, and these institutions are essentially elementary schools.

The Jeevan Shalas serve as a substitute for the government schools, which the local villagers allege exist only on papers. “The nearest government school is situated in Bilgaon which is at least 15 kilometres away. There is no transport available and the backwaters from the Sardar Sarovar Dam have made it even more difficult to commute. Young children cannot travel such distances daily,” said Ramesh Ganya, another teacher at the Jeevan Shala.

A 100 kms away from Swarya Digar village is a Jeevan Shala at Maniveli village in Nandurbar, near Akkalkuwa town. The nearest road to this village is 16 kilometres away, through the Satpura hills. There are 104 children studying at this school.

“I have been teaching here for the last 16 years. I decided to stay on and not move to a more comfortable location as these children would suffer if there was no one to teach them,” said Guru Singh, a teacher at the school. He feared that if learning was kept away from these children, they would be exploited for labour like their parents.

All these Jeevan Shalas are funded and managed by the Narmada Nav Nirman Abhiyan – a Mumbai-based trust which works for the rehabilitation and support of communities displaced by construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat.

Kailash Bharat Parwa, an 11-year-old Bhil child, studies at the Jeevan Shala at



These tribal children studying at Jeevan Shalas have managed to script success despite many odds.

Swarya Digar village that is 654 kilometres away from Pandharpur that is in Solapur district, where his parents work as cane cutters. There are 81 tribal students at the Jeevan Shala at Swarya Digar.

These schools are also held at night to educate the adivasi children whose parents leave them behind when they migrate for a couple of months to work as sugarcane cutters in other districts of Maharashtra and Gujarat.

There is no electricity in Jeevan Shala at Maniveli village and the surroundings are infested with snakes, said Sangeeta Wasaave, a local teacher. “This is the horrifying reality the children grow up with. No city-dwelling kid can learn in such conditions. Half the houses in the village are accessible only on a boat,” she added.

“It is difficult. Last month, one of our cooks slipped down the hill and we had to trek 16 kms carrying her on a cot to get her medical treatment,” Guru Singh, another teacher at the Jeevan Shala, said.

Tribal children studying at Jeevan Shalas have managed to script success despite such odds. “Many students who studied here are now working as government servants in various departments across Maharashtra. One of our former female students was chosen as the sarpanch of this village,” said Rajesh Wasaave, headmaster of another Jeevan Shala in Danel village. A total of 124 students study in this school.

“Thirty years ago, only three adivasi people in the village could read or write Marathi. Today, when I see the kids studying at the Jeevan Shala, I feel that I can die in peace. It used to be very difficult to make the administration even listen to our plight because we were illiterate,” said Noorji Kalcha Padvi, a 75-year-old inhabitant of Danel village.

“Education, in my experience, is a weapon for the weakest. We adivasis have been exploited non stop. To break away the shackles, we helped set up the first Jeevan Shala here in 1993,” Padvi added. □

STORY 93

The good samaritan

A railway engineer ensures education for underprivileged children in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh.



The children, irrespective of their age, are taught English and Hindi letters as none of them have ever been to a school before. PHOTOS: PRAKASH SINGH

PRAKASH SINGH

SUSHIL KUMAR MEENA, a railway engineer in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, takes out time for his charitable cause of educating children living in the slums. He also offers food to the children to make them believe in the importance of being educated. The classes organised by him are attended by children who otherwise spend their day as ragpickers.

Every day, upon performing his duties as a senior section engineer with the Indian Railways, Meena ensures that he teaches a class of almost 330 students in the Indirapuram locality in Ghaziabad.

His class is attended by children belonging to the underprivileged families which reside in the slums. These children who have been attending the classes since 2018 usually work as ragpickers and spend their day browsing through heaps of wastes lying in unmarked dumping grounds.

Meena also provides cooked meals to these children with a belief that food can make these impoverished children understand the importance of education.

Nirbhed Foundation, the non-governmental organisation founded by Meena, provides education to as many as 3,700 underprivileged children across the country. ▣

STORY 94

A farewell to alms

The Kanjar community in Akbarpur village of Uttar Pradesh traditionally begs for a living and none of its members have ever been to school. A village youth has brought a flicker of hope by teaching the first generation kids of this marginalised community.



RAMJI MISHRA

AKBARPUR (LAKHIMPUR KHERI),
UTTAR PRADESH

IN A POCKET-SIZED area outdoors, under the open sky, a few bamboo stakes and strips of cloth form a fence that enclose it. Children of Akbarpur village, tucked away in Lakhimpur Kheri

district, call it their classroom. They built the rickety enclosure and daily sit on the dusty ground hanging on to every word of their teacher, Anil Kumar Gautam, who they call, quite simply, guruji, or master ji.

Of the bunch of students who sat on the ground listening to their teacher was Aseem, who had just returned to the village after



Gautam hopes to progress on the path of imparting education to these children.

begging in a nearby town along with his parents. Like him, Yamini, Shyamal, Baldeep and some other students in the makeshift classroom in Akbarpur once begged.

These children belong to the Kanjar community, which has traditionally been begging for a living, and none of its members has ever been to a school. This bunch of 25 students in Gautam's classroom is the first generation students of the Kanjar community of Akbarpur.

And the credit for this new beginning goes to the 25-year-old village youth, Gautam, who has taken it upon himself to educate the children from the Kanjar community, which is a Scheduled Caste (SC). Gautam himself belongs to another SC community of the village.

"Somehow the idea that the young children I see laughing and playing in the village will soon be out in the streets of towns

and cities, begging, disturbed me," said the young teacher.

"I wanted to write a new chapter in the lives of these children hence started persuading their parents to send them to me for studying. About 25 students come to me for their daily classes," Gautam said, who could not complete his Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree due to his father's illness. But, he did not abandon his dream and is today teaching some of the most marginalised rural children.

"Three years ago, I was begging every day. But, master ji spoke to my parents and told them this was my age to study, not wander around begging," said Ankul, a student of Gautam. "I study Hindi, I read stories, I do *ganit* (maths)... I want to be a policeman when I grow up," he said.

Ankesh, who is in class two, said he was begging in Delhi before he came home and

joined the school. “Guruji told me I should learn. I like to study and I have decided I will not beg again,” he said.

Supporting Gautam in his mission are Kamala and Kusum, who cook at the primary school in Akbarpur. The children call them ‘amma’ fondly. Gautam has also registered these children at the local government school that was set up in 2006 and now has 161 children registered in it.

“The parents of these children made them beg. But now, they send them to school to study,” said Kamala. She said there were times when children did not turn up and she went to their homes and persuaded them to come to school, often tempting them with food.

While the children are also enrolled at the local primary school, they also come to Gautam for studying too. “I teach about twenty five children. But there are times I lose some of them who are taken away by their parents to other towns and villages to beg, and they miss classes,” Gautam rued.

“I wish I had more means. The kids have cleaned up and fenced in this ‘classroom’. They have used scraps from their old clothes to do so. With their help I have devised a board that I use as a blackboard,” the masterji said. “The children are so enthusiastic to learn that they do all they can to make our ‘classroom’ comfortable,” he added.

Gautam does not charge any fee from the students and has been teaching them for

“I teach about twenty five children. But there are times I lose some of them who are taken away by their parents to other towns and villages to beg, and they miss classes”

GAUTAM
EDUCATOR

free for the last couple of years. However, in the past few months, seeing the positive changes in their children, some parents on their own have started to offer minimal remuneration to him.

“I get about fifteen hundred rupees to two thousand a month, but whether they pay me or not, the classes will not stop,” Gautam said. When the schools shut down during the pandemic, Gautam’s outdoor community classes with a handful of children continued.

According to the inhabitants of Akbarpur, children going to the school and attending masterji’s classes is the beginning of a social change in their village. A slow but sure change.

Gautam continues his crusade of educating the children. “I hope we progress on the path of imparting education and nothing comes in the way of our journey,” he concluded. ■

STORY 95

Keeping education on track

Manmohan Singh works at a gurudwara in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, and spends a large part of his earnings in educating under-privileged children. His one such 'classroom' is under an open sky, next to the railway track where three college students teach children of daily wage labourers.



PHOTOS: MANISH DUBEY

MANISH DUBEY

KANPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

IT IS AN unusual location for a black board that stands next to the railway tracks under the open sky. Unconcerned by the rattle of the passing train, a young girl is writing something on the black board, watched closely by 30 to 40 pairs of bright inquisitive eyes.

Anjani Jaiswal, Anju Dubey, Saloni Yadav and Anjali Paswan take turns to teach

at this novel classroom at Dadanagar Kachchi Basti in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, that lies in crowded squalor on either side of the railway crossing.

“Three of us are studying in college. In the evenings, for an hour between 4 and 5 pm, we teach these children. And, we enjoy it,” smiled 26-year-old Anjani who is in her final year of BA (Bachelor of Arts).

Ranging between six and 10 years of age, these children of poor daily wage labourers



Manmohan Singh also ensures milk, biscuits and fruits for the tiny tots.

live in the makeshift structures that they call home, on either side of the railway track. Their parents can't afford to pay school fees.

Anjani, Saloni and Anjali (who is in her intermediate), teach the children, while Anju teaches the older girls and women in the slums, tailoring and sewing.

The children who are learning numbers, suddenly stop and swivel around. They have heard the sound of a scooter headed in their direction. It is Manmohan Singh bringing with him milk, biscuits and fruits for them!

Manmohan Singh and his wife Rajvinder Kaur are the driving force behind this education project. "For both myself and my wife, providing education and food to the uneducated and the hungry children comes way above spending money at religious places. No one cares what happens to these children. If we can make a difference in their lives, we are blessed," said 50-year-old Manmohan.

Manmohan Singh works at a Gurudwara in Gumti 5, in Kanpur. And, a part of whatever

money he earns there, he spends it on this mission. Along with healthy snacks for the children, Manmohan and Rajvinder Kaur, his 46-year-old wife, also provide them with books, notebooks, pencils and papers.

"The children get something nutritious to eat while they are with us. And, they love the stationery we give them. We hope these will keep them coming back to the classroom," Manmohan smiled. His wife Rajvinder also teaches the children. "We have been doing this for the past six years, and we have five such classrooms like the Dadanagar one across Kanpur, most of them around the railway tracks," she said.

These classrooms are in Sanjay Nagar, Govind Nagar Basti, Railwayline Basti and CTI Kachchi Basti. They enlist the support of young people there to teach the younger children, Rajvinder explained.

"In all, we have about 480 children who are studying in these five areas. And our expenses per month, including the college fee for the teachers comes to about Rs 24,000 a month," Manmohan said. □

STORY 96

From rag picking to reading – a retired school teacher is transforming young lives

Kanchan Sharma, a retired government school teacher in Jammu, provides free primary education to rag-picker children at her school Sangharsh Vidya Kendra.



MUBASHIR NAIK

MUBASHIK NAIK
JAMMU, J&K

ABBAS MASSIH, A 13-year-old, was a waste picker at Maratha Mohalla in Jammu, and when he was not collecting plastic garbage to sell, he would beg. “But, now I am the happiest kid in the world, and my backpack is my most prized possession,” he said.

Abbas was one of the lucky children who got a taste of primary education thanks to Sangarsh Vidya Kendra, a tin shed-school set up in 2009 by a retired school teacher, Kanchan Sharma.

For the past 13 years now, Sharma has been educating the poor children of migrant workers free of cost. Currently there are about 85 children who study there. Abbas

joined the school in 2016 and left in 2020 after completing his primary education. He is now studying at a government-run school.

Maratha Mohalla near the Tawi railway station is not a well-regarded neighbourhood. There are heaps of garbage everywhere and it is home to a huge population of migrant labourers who live there under temporary shelters made up of cardboard, tarpaulin and so on.

“I used to see young children begging and chewing tobacco, and felt so bad for them,” said the 63-year-old teacher. “These poor children have nowhere to study and are sucked into bad habits like substance abuse and begging,” Sharma pointed out.

The idea to set up a school for these children who had nowhere to study came to Sharma when she taught at a government school for girls at Gandhi Nagar in Jammu. “Three children who lived in a slum nearby approached me and asked me if they could join the school. I asked them if there were more children who wanted to join in and they said ‘yes’. After these three girls joined, 40 others enrolled into the Gandhi Nagar school,” Sharma recalled.

The idea took a firmer hold on her, and when she retired and saw so many children wandering the streets aimlessly, so vulnerable to a life of crime and drugs, she decided to start Sangarsh Vidya Kendra.

She got permission from the education department and used her own funds to

start the school in 2009. She persuaded the parents of children in the Maratha Mohalla shanty town, to enrol them into her school.

At present, the school has four teachers including Sharma who pays their salaries from her own funds. “All the kids are in the 5-13 years age group,” she said. “The sole objective of my school is to give kids access to free education. They also get free stationery, school supplies, and uniforms,” Sharma said. The children in her school now take part in extra-curricular activities such as debates and sports.

In 2009, Kanchan Sharma won an award from the Gandhi Global Family, which is a United Nations Department of Global Communications accredited Peace NGO that propagates the ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela among youth.

The same year she received the Best Counsellor award from the Red Cross Society of India. In 2019, she won the Best Teacher award, from the state administration. The school went through hard times like so many others across the country, during the pandemic. “Schools were shut during the lockdown and I arranged a few smartphones to conduct online classes,” Sharma said.

But to her dismay many of the children slipped back into begging. Things limped back to normal post the lockdown and the number of students now fluctuated between 85 to 100, she said. ■

STORY 97

From dropouts to achievers – a village school is bridging the education gap

Over 1,300 rural girls from the tribal communities of West Singhbhum district in Jharkhand have got a second shot at education thanks to the initiative of the Camp School which offers a nine-month course and helps enrol girls in government schools.



PHOTOS: MANOJ CHOUDHARY

MANOJ CHOUDHARY

NOAMUNDI (WEST SINGHBHUM), JHARKHAND

RICHA HEMBROM ENTERS the blue gates of her school every day with a spring in her step. The 13-year-old girl from Ho tribal community aspires to become a medical doctor.

During the nationwide lockdown due to COVID pandemic, Richa dropped out of school when she was in class four of her primary school at Tatiba village in West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. As she came from a family that could not afford to get her a smartphone for her online classes, she could not continue



The Camp School is silently changing the lives of girls from tribal communities by giving them a second shot at education.

her studies. She stayed home, resigned to being a dropout.

But, the Camp School, a unique educational institution for drop-out girls from tribal communities, has rekindled her hopes and dreams of making it big in life.

The school, located in Noamundi village and run by a non-profit ASPIRE, provides coaching to students such as Richa so that they can make up for the learning loss they suffered academically when they had to drop out of school.

It has a nine-month residential course, and Richa has already completed seven months. After the course she should be able to get admission at a government school.

“I had lost hope of completing school education after the lockdown but now I want to become a doctor,” said Richa. The Camp School is silently changing the lives of girls from tribal communities by giving them a second shot at education.

“Since its inception in 2005, the school has rehabilitated 1,300 school dropouts and restarted their educational journey,” said Anjali Sulanki, ASPIRE’s staff at Noamundi, and an ex-teacher herself. The nonprofit’s mission is to support poor rural students to complete school education.

The Camp School was established under the Jharkhand Shiksha Pariyojna (Jharkhand Education Project). It was run with the help of corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds provided by the mining industries in West Singhbhum district, which is one of the top districts in the country for iron ore mining. The non-profit ASPIRE took over the school in 2018.

Explaining how dropout students are identified, Sulanki said that ASPIRE has a gram panchayat community mobiliser in the area who identifies school dropouts and enables them to join the Camp School. “Girls between the ages of nine and 14, who for some reason have not been able to continue their studies, who are orphans,



The Camp School was established under the Jharkhand Shiksha Pariyojna (Jharkhand Education Project).

or are children of single parents are taken into the Camp School,” she said. The girls studying at the school are provided with free food, accommodation and reading material at the school, and are taught the syllabus of classes one to five, depending on each one’s age and learning capabilities.

“After they complete the nine months, they are admitted into the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya in Noamundi,” said Sulanki. Every year around 100 girls are admitted to the school. Students who do not make it into the government schools are given another nine month’s training at the Camp School.

There are five female teachers in all who conduct classes at the Camp School. “During classes, girls are divided into different groups to improve their self-confidence. The girls call their teachers didi [elder sister] and they all live together in the campus,” said Nandini Behra, who is in charge of the Camp School.

“The teachers and students develop a special bond and we also ensure that

the teachers are given regular training to upgrade their teaching skills,” said Behra.

According to her, teachers at the Camp School focus on girls’ learning skill, leadership qualities, and academics. The girls also participate in fun activities, she added. The teachers ensure that they speak to the girls in their language or dialect.

“Sometimes the language problem comes in the way of their learning,” Roshni Kandai-buru, another teacher at the Camp School, told Gaon Connection. “We talk to them in their language initially and then train them in Hindi,” she added.

For many children who were orphaned, the Camp School has been a blessing, said Sombari Kui, a resident of Noamundi Basti. “A decade ago, I provided a home to Tulsi and Sanjay Sinku, eight and two years old respectively, when they lost both their parents. Tulsi was admitted to the Camp School, after which she went to a regular school, and is now studying in class eight,” said Sombari. ■

STORY 98

Only Re 1 admission fee in this school for kids from ragpicking families

In this school in Kanpur, the students from economically weaker families not only get free education but also learn to make products out of discarded materials, and convert vegetable peels into compost.



MANISH DUBEY

MANISH DUBEY

JUHI PARAMPURVA (KANPUR),
UTTAR PRADESH

IN A TINY SCHOOL in Juhi Parampurva village in Kanpur district, Uttar Pradesh, Dharmendra Kumar Singh runs a school called Samrat Ashok Vidya Udyan, with

252 children. The school is no more than 325 square yards in area.

The school building came into being in 2012. Before that children studied under a tin roof nearby. "Of the 252 students who study here, 117 of them cannot afford to pay any fees. We do not take even a rupee

from them. The rest of the students pay one rupee as admission charges and Rs 100 a month as fees,” said Singh.

Most of the children who do not pay fees have no fathers and are in care of guardians who may or may not want to pay the money for their education. Singh said that was the reason nothing was charged from them.

“These are children who come from homes where rag picking is the source of income for the families. Often the mothers are abandoned by their husbands and they have to look after their children,” Singh said. There are eleven teachers in the school that has classes from kindergarten to class eight.

Singh, originally from Jaunpur in Kanpur district, is a postgraduate in science and holds a Bachelors in Mass Communications. The 46-year-old teacher is the author of a compilation of short stories, called *Lohe Ka Sandook*.

“The school is not a centre of profit. We have well wishers who have joined us in our efforts to provide education for these children and the school runs on their contributions,” Singh explained. Some benefactors donate books, some others sponsor the fees of a few of the children and there are also those who sponsor the teachers in order to pay their salaries, he said.

The children in the school make cleaning rags and brushes with waste material, prepare compost with vegetable peels,

etc, which are sold and some income is generated. “We have also involved some of the women in the area, who make stuffed toys, etc. at home and give it to us. We sell them and pay them some money,” Singh added.

Soon big organisations such as HAL (Hindustan Aeronautics Limited) have begun to take the products the school makes. Children make stuffed toys, key rings, etc., that gives them an added incentive too.

In 2010-2011, Singh started a social media campaign for the children of rag pickers which generated a lot of interest. R Vikram, former DGP (Director general of police) of Uttar Pradesh between 2007 and 2009, was impressed with the campaign, and he reached out.

“He entrusted the work of eleven government schools to us. The teachers had to collect and collate data for the schools, and this earned us some money,” Singh said. Some of the students of Samrat Ashok Vidya Udyan, also found admission in some of these government schools, something they could never dream of.

Samrat Ashok Vidya Udyan has also become a kind of a study centre where students from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad and Kanpur University come here to research, the teacher said with pride. The governor of the state also honoured Dharmendra Singh last year for the social work he has been undertaking. ■

STORY 99

The Bansa Community Library, where books and conversations inform people

A community library in Bansa village of UP is a space for conversations, gathering information and reading for pleasure. It is frequented by farmers, MGNREGA workers and elderly population.



AISHWARYA TRIPATHI

SANTOSHI DEVI MAY not be lettered. But she gets important information at the Bansa community library where she works as a cleaner. In the course of a conversation with a visitor, she got to know about the Uttar Pradesh Government's women helpline number, 1090.

"I have been part of monthly meetings held at the library. We often discuss topics like '*apka pradhan kitna saksham hai*' and it is through such conversations that I know about a lot of things I didn't know before," said 50-year-old Devi.

Inaugurated in the village in December 2020, Bansa Community Library is open to all – with no bar on age, gender, caste or class. The library has 1,700 registered members, both adults and children from the neighbouring villages in the district.

The library was the dream of 25-year-old Jatin

The library was established with the help of crowdfunding. Two librarians manage the library seven days a week, with extended hours on Sundays from 9 am to 7 pm.

Lalit Singh. He wanted to create a space in Bansa village – his hometown – where people could read for pleasure. His objective was to create a reading culture and sustain. The library was established with the help of crowdfunding. Two librarians manage the library seven days a week, with extended hours on Sundays from 9 am to 7 pm.

Today, 76-year-old Mahendra Singh, a farmer who has worked hard all his life, has made time for himself to come here and borrow books. Mahendra Singh visits the library everyday and issues almost five books per week.

“I am too old for farm work and my sons and grandsons have their own lives to live. These books have filled my time and they keep me occupied,” said Singh, who is a big fan of Munshi Premchand.

Singh said he spent a better part of his day reading and in the evenings he took a walk to the library to exchange the books and catch up with others there.



Mahendra Singh said he spent a better part of his day reading and in the evenings he took a walk to the library to exchange the books and catch up with others there.

“When the library became functional, we met so many women and men in their 70s visiting. For many of them, they were handling books for the first time in their lives,” said Jatin.

The idea of starting a community library in his village came to Jatin from The Community Library Project [TCLP] in New Delhi,



While finding the money to set up the library was not that difficult, mobilising the community to start reading for pleasure was, said the founder.

where he volunteered on weekends, when he was a student of law in Delhi in 2016. TCLP has set up three libraries that are open through the week in Delhi and Gurugram, catering to a membership of over 6,000 children and adults.

The library runs a monthly 'Kanoon ki Pathshala'. The village inhabitants meet an advocate virtually, who informs them about their rights and tells them how to seek legal help if they need to.

Sant Kumar is still a busy farmer, and a MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) worker, but he makes sure he visits the library on his way back home from work.

"I come here to read the newspaper.

Many times, we get into discussions and debates with fellow readers about some news article," he said. Thanks to Kanoon ki Pathshala, he knows that he must be given 100 days of work annually under MGNREGA.

"If I don't, I have the right to approach the pradhan and also get bhatta [compensation] for the same," he stated.

Rakesh Kumar reads the patrikas [magazine] and picks up environment news that he incorporates in his life as well as that of the community.

"It was in the library that I learnt how grave the problem of water scarcity is. We are close to exhausting our water supply, I know now," he said. ■

STORY 100

For 'Rastar Master', where there's a wall, there's a way

A teacher brings learning to unlettered women in the villages of West Bengal by converting walls in their neighbourhoods into 'blackboards'. The 'Rastar Master' has also reduced the dropout rates of his students as their mothers and grandmothers now realise the importance of education.

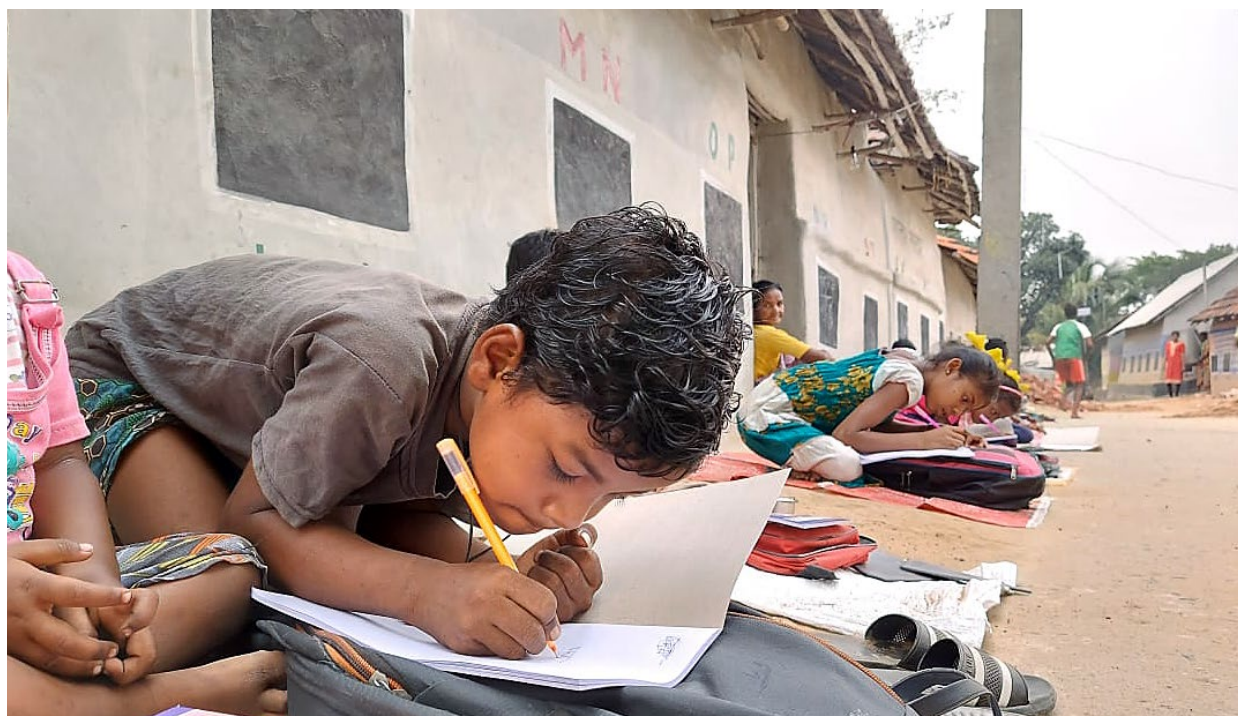


AISHWARYA TRIPATHI

DEEP NARAYAN NAYAK has become a household name in some of the most marginalised villages in the five districts of West Bengal. He has brought classroom teaching out into the streets and is called 'Rastar Master' or the

master of the streets.

The 36-year-old teacher has painted the walls of the villages black and turned them into blackboards. This has made education accessible to the women who may be reluctant to come to a regular school to learn.



Nayak decided to start open-air schools in 2015 and painted the walls with a special paint made up of cow dung, coal dust, and a few other ingredients, transforming them into blackboards.

The ‘blackboard-on-the-wall’ project that began as an experiment in 2015, is presently being run in 50 such open air sites with the street classes being organised in five districts of West Bengal – Paschim Bardhaman, Purulia, Birbhum, Bankura and Hooghly.

When Nayak’s street classes gained fame on social media, teachers posted at remote villages facing similar education-related challenges picked up on the strategy.

“They reached out to me to understand how to adopt this in their villages. After all, it takes counselling of the communities and special teachers’ training to replicate this,” Nayak said. The teacher travelled

across the villages in the five districts to help the fellow teachers with the initial set up.

Presently, the project is extending education to almost 10,000 children belonging to Munda, Santhal and Oraon tribes, Scheduled Castes and Muslim communities, who in turn pass on what they learn to their mothers.

“I taught students for four to five years and then saw them drop out of the school – boys would quit education to become labourers and girls would get married. It would have been a waste of my *tapasya* [hard work] if my students continued to drop out and I wasn’t able to make



To emphasise the significance of sending their children to school and the potential for a better life, Nayak initiated the education of women in open-air classrooms.

any changes in the development of the community,” said Nayak.

He realised that just teaching the children would not change anything. He set up separate classes in the school for the mothers of his first-generation students to introduce them to the importance of education.

“But the approach failed. These were poor labourers who couldn’t afford to miss work, how could they possibly show up at these classes regularly at the expense of their daily wage,” he asked.

Nayak decided on open air schools in the streets of the tribal villages in Jamuria area of Paschim Bardhaman district in West Bengal. He painted walls with a special paint made up of cow dung, coal dust and a few other ingredients and transformed them into blackboards. He started the project in Churulia village in Paschim Bardhaman district when he was posted there

at a government primary school in 2015.

Nayak has been a teacher since 2010 and is presently teaching at the state government’s Tilka Majhi Adibasi Free Primary School in Jamuria area of Paschim Bardhaman district. While his project began as a one man show, there are 300 volunteers who are working with him today.

In the tribal communities and villages, most inhabitants struggle to make ends meet. And, education of children hardly figures as a priority. In order to impress upon them the importance of sending their children to school and how it could change their lives for the better, Nayak began educating the women folk in the open-air classrooms.

He taught them letters of the alphabet, numbers and how to sign their names. He firmly believes that educating the woman in the family meant educating the entire family.

“The mothers could read and write while cooking on the *chulhas* [mud stove],” he said. Interestingly, while teaching is usually about knowledge transfer from the eldest to the youngest, Nayak first taught the youngest in these street classes, who then taught their mothers and *dadi-nanis* (grandmothers).

“It’s a fair exchange. The child teaches the *maa* and *dadi-nani* how to count and write their names, and the *nani* teaches the child *jhoomar gaan* (a local cultural song) – which ensures a progressive leap while remaining connected to the cultural roots. Three generations have been learning together,” he said proudly.

Nayak was elated when he heard that a mother questioned a *muneem* (cashier) when she got less wages. She switched from giving her thumb impression to signing the payment receipt while collecting her daily wage and has also learnt counting.

“She could call out the fraud,” he said.

The Rastar Master has managed to balance his unique project along with his regular government job.

“It’s not difficult. I give three hours in the morning from 6:30 to 9:30, and then after school 4 pm to 9 pm. The evening classes are crucial as they see the turnout of female adults who get done with the house chores only after 7 pm. First they were hesitant but when a mother came

Nayak was elated when he heard that a mother questioned a *muneem* (cashier) when she got less wages. She switched from giving her thumb impression to signing the payment receipt while collecting her daily wage and has also learnt counting.

forward, others followed,” he said.

“We have 50 teachers, 100 helpers and 80 volunteers who take guest classes and provide motivational support to the rural folk,” he added.

The helpers are the people from the community who speak Santhali and are a crucial link in the chain he has forged. Today, mothers and daughters share books and sit for examinations together. The mothers who fare well in their studies are felicitated in the locally organised ceremony by Nayak’s team. ■



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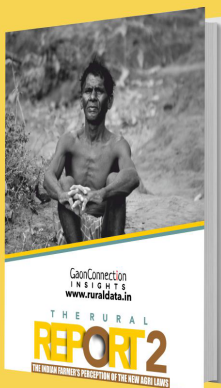
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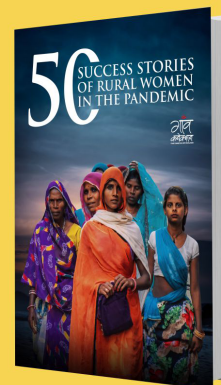
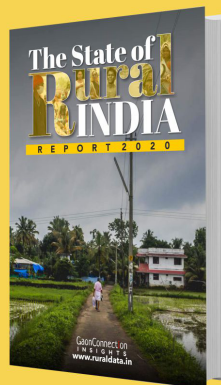
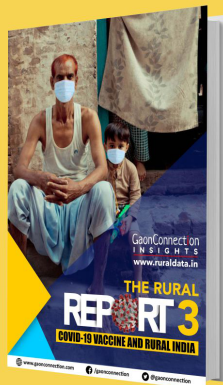
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