

'Hello ji', I said, picking up the mobile phone. A child's voice on the other end responded, 'Hello teacher.' I quickly disconnected the call so I could call him back instead. The child answered the phone and told me his name. He led the conversation and asked me, 'What did you eat today?', 'What has been prepared at your house today?' (These are common small talk phrases people use in Chhattisgarh to move a conversation forward).

The lockdown was in its twentieth day, so I responded, 'We're under complete lockdown. Right now, we're only eating potatoes and soybean *baris*. What did you eat today?' The child took some time to respond. After a pause, he said, 'Teacher, the thing is, papa was out of town and he has been stuck there during the lockdown. Today, we had only rice.'

I composed myself and told him to get his mother on the phone. I talked to her and got a complete picture of the situation. There were three people living in their house at the time. All the grocery items, save for rice, had run out. His mother had not approached anybody for help, out of self-respect.

I quickly shared the details of the situation with my team and organisation members. Through talks and discussions with the team members, it was revealed that many other children were in the same situation. The Foundation* was quick to respond to the needs of this family. Besides them, they also provided rations and essential items to other families who were in need but were not asking to maintain their dignity. Teachers also surveyed their areas and prepared a list of people in need of help and provided this to the Foundation. The Foundation immediately procured the rations and keeping the dignity of the beneficiaries topmost in our minds, our team delivered rations to the families. The relationship between teachers and children is one of such melodious harmony that children share their experiences and troubles without any hesitation.

This lockdown has been a source of many revelations. I was told by some Foundation members that there is a region where no ration cards have been made

for the past three generations of people. How were they to receive any help? Our Foundation stepped forward to help them during these difficult times but what hope do they have of any help going forward? This also strengthened the belief that children should be educated not just about moral values but constitutional values as well, so they may become citizens who are aware of their rights and entitlements and are able to raise important questions.

Another experience during the distribution of rations was that many people in a village came forward forcefully demanding rations, clamouring that they were in need too. When we asked them if they had nothing to eat whatsoever, they said they did but were ensuring they had stocks for the future too because of the uncertainty of the lockdown and when it would be lifted. I calmly explained to them that we were currently helping people whose needs were immediate. The Councillor of the ward was accompanying us, and he also ensured them that if the situation were to worsen, the government would provide assistance. They were not willing to listen or compromise, but we stood our ground. We registered their names for future purposes and after this assurance, they went away. These were tense moments. Education also teaches us to mould ourselves according to our circumstances and situations. For us being able to reach people in need felt like a respite from the heat on a hot day.

Children's learning

In the beginning, small talk with the children about their wellbeing over the phone was a pleasant diversion from these tense times, for both teachers and the children. We talked and sang songs and rhymes and narrated stories. However, at times, we spent hours trying to get all the children on a conference call but problems with the signal forbade this. Still, we kept trying. Sometimes, the call would be connected only for it to be disconnected soon. This was the experience of all the teachers. However, we were able to sustain a dialogue on children's studies through personal

calls and individual discussions. We were also relying on parental support in this. However, once the period of unlocking began, parents started leaving the house for work with their phones and we lost contact with the children. Thus, we were faced with a substantial challenge: How would children's studies progress now?

Teachers began preparing workbooks that would allow children to read and answer questions on the readings by themselves. Since they did not yet have their books for the next grade, we believed that these workbooks would prove to be useful. Teachers worked hard and prepared workbooks for different topics and subjects and delivered them to the children's doorsteps. Keeping in mind all safety precautions, like wearing masks, face shields and gloves; using sanitisers and; maintaining physical distance, teachers would deliver these workbooks to the children's homes every week and collect the completed workbooks. Children's responses would be discussed over phone calls. However, this exercise too proved to be difficult for children who still face a challenge in reading and writing. Though I, like the other teachers, was designing workbooks according to the children's learning level, limited understanding still posed a challenge for us all.

Teachers, children and the community

During community visits to sustain a regular dialogue on children's learning, we had built a kinship with children's parents and other village members through amicable discussions. Whenever and wherever we met, we would greet one other, and they are very forthright about their opinion on children's learning which helped us in the teaching-learning process. Owing to the closing of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, our primary concern has been to keep children from feeling alienated from their studies. When there was a relaxation in the lockdown, we put forward the idea of continuing children's studies with the community members ensuring that all safety protocol is followed to the tee.

The community members agreed and even freed up the community hall for the same. Furthermore, a few educated young people from the village came forward to help with the task of children's education and they have been continuing this till now. This group of volunteers also included some of our old students who have passed their matriculation exams in the academic year 2019-20. They have taken charge of small groups of primary

graders and are helping them with their learning.

The cooperation on the part of the parents and other community members, many of who have opened their courtyards for the purpose of children's education, is also commendable. A few other social service organisations have also been helping us. As a result, we have been able to divide ourselves into small groups and have been able to reach seven villages where our children hail from and work with them continuously.

During the pandemic, there is a constant worry about children, teachers and volunteers getting infected because everybody is constantly moving around. Parents, teachers and children are all stepping out of their homes for daily tasks and coming in contact with others. Though everybody is ensuring that they take proper safety measures, a worry still lingers. It is a challenge for teachers and children and their parents to be stress-free in such stressful times.

A silver lining

With time, the situation is changing. People are facing the pandemic in the best way they know. They are not letting it dampen their spirits. They are beginning to learn to live with masks and sanitisers and maintaining good hygiene practices and physical distancing. We are glad that the children are now stress-free. My fellow teachers recorded rhymes and songs and sent them to the children. The videos and stories we had recorded in the beginning are now proving useful for the children in their studies. We have been looking at this experience in a positive light by thinking of how many children, parents and teachers have only now realised the true potential of their mobile phones.

Parents who were not keen on having a dialogue or having us come to their houses are now talking openly to both their children and to us, teachers. A few parents and community members have furthered their horizons. They have graciously lent their empty spaces for the purpose of children's education and some have even helped in the teaching-learning process. Some parents have begun to help not just their children but other children in their neighbourhood with their studies too. They have displayed utmost sensitivity in the times of COVID-19 that has helped keep children away from worry. Hopefully, this spirit will continue.

In any society, education is a central institution that can bring about sweeping changes. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has stressed the

importance of educated members of the society coming forward to help children in their learning process and it anticipates this participation. During these times, a student composed a rhyme and sang it for me, and I often find myself humming it. I leave you with this song written by the girl:

ये सुन न, ये तू सुन न
कोरोना से है बचना तो
तू घर से बिना वजह बहार निकल न॥ ये
निकलना है बहुत ही जरूरी तो
मास्क, दूरी और सेनी टाइजर या साबुन उपयोग करना ॥ ये....
अपने बड़े –बुजुर्गों का ध्यान है रखना
उनकी तहे दिल से चिंता है करना
जो है संक्रमित उनसे शारीरिक दूरी बनाना
पर प्यार व सेहत बना रहे ये ध्यान रखना ॥ ये...

हैं वो भी अपने जो हैं (डॉक्टर, पुलिस,नर्स, स्वछताकर्मी....) लड़ रहे कोरोना से

उनका सम्मान पहले है करना

ये कोरोना तो एक दिन तो चला जाएगा

फिर आपस में इसके लिए दिल में हैं भेद क्यों है करना॥ ये....

ये सुन न, ये सुन सुन न

(Listen, O Listen / If you wish to avoid corona / Don't leave your house without a cause / Listen...
If leaving is absolutely necessary / Sanitiser, hand wash, distance and mask are your accessories / Care for your elders / Keep them in your thoughts / Keep distance from those infected / But don't make them feel dejected / The ones fighting are also family / Treat them with respect accordingly / Corona will leave one day / So, why let any differences stay / Listen, O Listen...)

*Azim Premji Foundation



Janak Ram has a Bachelor's degree in Science and a Master's degree in Education and Sociology. He has been a mathematics teacher at the Azim Premji School, Dhamtari since December 2016, after completing two years of fellowship at the Azim Premji Institute. As a teacher, he likes to be friends with children and is interested in learning and understanding the processes of mathematics together. He can be contacted at janak.ram@azimpremji.org