

Reimagining Education

Shubham Garg and Vishnu Gopal

Demographics

Gramin Shiksha Kendra works in villages on the periphery of the Ranthambhore National Park in Sawai Madhopur and the Khandar blocks of the Sawai Madhopur district. The total population of the district is around 14.5 lakhs, having a sex ratio of 897* females per 1000 males. Around 80 percent of the district's population lives in rural areas. The female and male literacy rates (7+ years) in rural Sawai Madhopur are 42.40 percent and 79.40 percent, respectively. In 2006, the district was declared backward by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. Sawai Madhopur is largely an agriculture-based economy. The *Gurjars* (traditionally pastoralists) and the *Meenas* (a Scheduled Tribe but now mainly involved in agriculture) are the two majority communities here. There is a small but significant population of other caste groups - *Malis, Bairwas, Harijans, Bhopas, Jaggas*, and some de-notified tribal groups - *Gadiya Lauhars, Moghiyas, Bawariyas, Kanjars*, to name a few. Tourism is another sector in which the rural population is engaged in, as cleaners, cooks, or tourist guides. Some of them are also running their own *dhabas* (roadside food-stalls).

Effects of the pandemic

It has been observed that, historically, every disaster tends to weaken the social fabric of the nation by creating more inequities and injustices around us. The pandemic and its aftermath have brought all our lives to a standstill. India, currently, has the second-highest number of COVID-19 cases globally. We are now witnessing the penetration of the virus even in rural areas. The worst affected are those who are at the bottom of the pyramid, that is, the most vulnerable and marginalised groups of our society. The loss of livelihoods during the pandemic has caused significant distress in these communities.

Of those impacted by the pandemic children, especially girls, from the disadvantaged communities are affected the most. It is unfortunate that children are compelled to stay

away from their learning spaces. For a child coming from a disadvantaged household, the school is a safe space which not only facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and essential life-skills, but also ensures her psycho-emotional wellbeing by engaging her with her peer-groups through various scholastic and co-scholastic activities. The absence of these spaces at such a crucial developmental phase of children's lives is a threat, both to their learning and to their holistic growth.

At present, these children (more so, the girls) spend most of their time doing household chores and in income-generating activities such as farming, cattle-rearing, selling vegetables, etc. Sunita, a student at *Uday Samudayik Pathshala, Jaganpura* sold vegetables to support her family, as during the lockdown her two elder brothers were laid-off from a hotel where they worked.

The longer the children stay away from education, the lower will be their chances of getting back to school, when the schools reopen. In such circumstances, children are likely to drop out and engage in supporting their families economically or will be married off early. It is important for educational organisations to think of alternative and safe ways of imparting inclusive education to children.

Digital learning - an effective alternative?

Digital Learning is seen nowadays as an alternative mode of education. The NEP 2020 also highlights and emphasises the use of technology in education.

In a diverse society like ours, however, relying on virtual learning is not in the best interest of our children and will not help in attaining the goals of inclusive education because education is not just the transmission of information from teachers to children. It is an experiential and interactive way of acquiring knowledge and skills in a supportive environment. Social connect between a child and a teacher is an essential factor for quality education. This crucial element is missing in the case of virtual learning in which teachers and children remain distant from each other.

Another disadvantage is that the digital divide promotes inequity as it excludes children from the weaker sections of our society. We work with communities where only ten to fifteen percent of the households have access to digital equipment. Then again, in rural households, children often do not have the space to study at home because large families reside in small houses. With all these constraints, we realised that this mode of education could not be a way forward for us.

Small steps towards inclusive education

During the lockdown, we began by interacting with children by regularly calling their parents to know about their wellbeing. It was difficult to reach every child because many of the households in our communities do not even have mobile phones.

Once the lockdown was relaxed, our teachers began to visit the communities and meet children and their parents, while following the safety measures recommended by the government. The children were ecstatic to see their teachers back. Both the parents and children were anxiously waiting for schools to reopen and the parents demanded that we resume the education of their children so that their time could be constructively utilised. After discussing its feasibility with parents and teachers, we decided to resume the education of the children.

The learning spaces

From July 2020 onwards we - the *Uday Community Schools*- have been engaging with the children by creating learning spaces within village communities. Different approaches were adopted for children of different age-groups depending upon their educational needs and safety requirements.

Primary classes

For children in the age-group 7-14 years, learning spaces were identified collectively by parents and teachers within the villages. In these learning spaces, the children can engage, play, learn, express and socialise with each other.

Early Childhood Education

We work in the early childhood education space with the children in the three-six years age group, who are enrolled in three *Uday Samudayik Pathshalas* and two government *anganwadis* of Fariya and Katar villages of Sawai Madhopur. Our teachers are working closely with the parents, especially the mothers, to engage the children in activities which help their motor and cognitive

skills and psycho-social development. They develop easy-to-comprehend assignments for parents to carry out with their children at home. A teacher spends around half-an-hour to one hour with the caregiver going over previous activities and sharing the next activity.

Our teachers also educate parents regarding the nutritional requirements of the children. They monitor the growth of children using the WHO recommended growth monitoring charts which indicate the level of stunting and wasting among children. We have also involved the *anganwadi*



Our teacher monitoring the weight of a child, Jaganpura village



Our teacher having a discussion on ECCE with a mother

teachers and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) in this process. Teachers also speak about safety measures and the importance of hygiene with individuals and households for prevention from COVID-19.

Academic sessions

The objectives of conducting these sessions are to ensure inclusive education for the children as well as to protect their basic rights during these difficult times.

Preparations

Teachers formed small groups of eight to ten children each to work with. The children come from the local village communities and so it was not difficult to connect with them. We ensured that the children did not have to travel far. The sessions are held for four hours every day in open spaces within the villages, such as under a tree, or in an open *chaupal/verandah* where there is sufficient light and ventilation. With small groups, it is easier to maintain physical distancing of at least one meter.

The community took charge and arranged soap and water at the centres. Both teachers and children wear masks during classes. Parents are encouraged to provide home-made masks and children have breakfast before they come for the classes. They bring their own learning kits, water bottles, and mats to sit on so that there is no physical contact among them. There are short breaks after every 45-60 minutes of class when children and teachers wash their hands with soap. These small steps also reinforce and create opportunities for discussing hygiene and safety measures with children.

The teachers assemble daily at *Uday Samudayik Pathshalas* to share a review of daily activities with their team. They prepare their daily lesson plans for the next day based on the review of their work with the children.



Seating arrangement with safety measures



A child demonstrating his working model of pull-cart at Uday School, Fariya

Single-teacher classes

To minimise the risk of infection during travel, teachers stay in the village where they teach. Every teacher is assigned a group with which she works on all the subjects - Hindi, English, mathematics, social science, science, and arts. The children work on co-scholastic activities, such as creative writing and arts at home. Since the children within a group have varied learning levels, teachers are practising the multi-grade, multi-level pedagogy. The subject teachers at *Uday Samudayik Pathshalas* assist their fellow teachers in preparing lesson plans for the respective subjects.

Creative writing

A learning process is not effective unless it gets related to real-life experiences. Since the schools are closed, children are confined within their houses during which each one must have gone through different and uncommon experiences. Children in rural areas do not often get opportunities to express themselves. Creative writing is an area where the children and teachers deliberate on what they have experienced during the pandemic and share their experiences and thoughts in the form of reflections, stories, poems, songs, and essays.

मेरा तोता

अप्रैल का महिना था और लॉकडाउन चल रहा था। हमारे स्कूल का अवकाश चल रहा था। एक दिन, हमारे बाड़े में एक नीम का पेड़ है, उसमें एक तोता बैठा था। मेरी निगाह उस तोते पर पड़ी। मैंने

उस तोते की तरफ हाथ उपर किया, लेकिन वह नहीं उड़ा और वह मुझे उदास-उदास सा दिख रहा था। एक बार मैंने फिर उसको उड़ाने की कोशिश की, वह नहीं उड़ा। मैंने धीरे-धीरे अपना हाथ उस तोते की ओर बढ़ाया। वह नहीं उड़ा इसलिए मैंने उसको पकड़ लिया। तोता मुझे उदास और बीमार सा लग रहा था। मैं उसको वहां से उठाकर घर ले आई। उसको एक कटोरी में पानी रखी, कुछ अनाज के दाने डाले। उसने एक-दो दाने खाये और उसी जगह पर बैठा रहा। मैं रोज उसको दाना-पानी रखती। वह दो-तीन दिन बाद धीरे-धीरे घूमने लगा। अब वह ठीक हो गया था। वह कही जाता नहीं था। धीरे-धीरे वह हमारा दोस्त सा बन गया। लेकिन कुछ दिनों बाद एक दिन वह गायब हो गया। हमने उसको तीन-चार दिन तक खूब ढूँढा, लेकिन वह नहीं मिला। मैं अभी तक भी उदास हूँ क्योंकि मुझे मेरा तोता नहीं मिला।

लाली गुर्जर, कक्षा 7, उदय सामुदायिक पाठशाला, गिरिराजपुरा

The above story in Hindi by a grade VII child is about her rescuing an injured parrot, taking care of it till one day it flies away. It highlights how creative writing helps language-learning, creative expression and understanding emotions as she expresses her sadness at the loss of her parrot. We compile their work to publish it in our bi-monthly children’s magazine called *Morange*.

Community libraries

The closing of schools also stopped children’s access to books in school libraries. We have now set up libraries within the communities to provide access to books to children of all age groups. Children run these libraries by managing distribution, record-keeping and coordinating with teachers to replenish the books at regular intervals.



Children reading books at Uday, Fairy

Learning through projects

As the hours of engagement with children have significantly reduced during the pandemic, the emphasis is on creating opportunities to self-explore and self-learn. The teachers play the role of facilitators. The children are engaged through a variety of creative projects - illustrating a book, setting up a restaurant, framing house-rules to keep COVID away, etc. All these activities improve their life-skills, especially critical thinking and teamwork. Every child has been completing an average of three projects per month. When a project is completed, feedback is collected from both children and parents to create the next projects.



Project 'Restaurant' by the children at Uday Samudayik Pathshala, Girirajpura

Encouraging girls

Adolescent girls are the most at-risk group due to the current situation. As they are mostly engaged in performing household chores, the chance of their dropping out of school is very high and there is an even greater chance of their being married off. We are engaging with the girls who recently passed grade VIII and working with them on their academic and life skills so as to strengthen their agency and help them continue their education.

Health and hygiene

As schools are closed, the restriction on sports activities has significantly affected the physical, mental, and socio-emotional development of children. At the request of the community, we have opened our school playgrounds for the children for two to three hours every day. Our sports teachers

facilitate activities on the field and reinforce the safety measures to be followed by the children.

Teachers are working to build community resilience towards COVID-19. In this process, they are having dialogues with the children on the pandemic and measures to prevent its transmission. The children are running campaigns in their neighbourhood to build awareness on preventive measures from the disease.

Technology-aided capacity-building

During the strict lockdown, technology proved to be a boon in facilitating our teachers' capacity-building process. Teachers could connect with each other for co-learning because of technology and attended several webinars on their personal and professional development.

Conclusion

With these efforts, despite the lockdowns and the disruption they caused, we have been able to reach out to all the 325 children enrolled in Uday Community Schools and the two government *anganwadis* where we work. Many parents whose children are in government schools are now demanding similar initiatives from their schools after observing our work for over a month.

The community is happy to see their children learning and engaging in various activities in their presence. They are also satisfied with the fact that while government schools are closed because of the pandemic, the teachers at *Uday Samudayik Pathshalas* are still working with the children to provide quality education in these challenging times without compromising on the recommended safety measures.

**Source: Census Data 2011*

Names have been changed to protect the identities of the children.



Shubham Garg is the Executive Director of *Gramin Shiksha Kendra*, an organization working with rural communities to enhance the quality of education in government schools. He oversees the operations, partnerships, and capacity-building functions at *Gramin Shiksha Kendra*. Shubham holds a Masters' degree in rural management from the Institute of Rural Management, Anand (IRMA). Shubham can be reached at shubham.garg@graminshiksha.org.in.



Vishnu Gopal Meena is the Academic Coordinator of *Gramin Shiksha Kendra* and has 20 years of experience of working in the school education space. He has played a key role in setting up *Uday Samudayik Pathshalas* and introducing Sports to connect children with education. Vishnu is also the editor of the children's magazine, *Morange*, published by *Gramin Shiksha Kendra*. Vishnu can be reached at vishnu.gopal@graminshiksha.org.in.