Community Supported Learning in Rural Areas

Tultul Biswas

COVID-19, declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization, might well change the world forever! It has shattered lives, disrupted markets, challenged our social fabric and the long-term impact is yet to be seen. It has completely halted formal education activities across the world. Children are unable to go to school and attend classes, interact with their peers and engage with formal academic activities. Across India, children have been out of school and at home since March this year.

The background

Children going to government schools are facing double disadvantages as the midday meal (MDM) that gave them at least one assured hot meal a day as well as the long gap in any kind of formal teaching-learning exposure, have both been snatched away from them. Closed *anganwadis* will additionally also cause roadblocks to children's access to immunisation. Once schools reopen, we will be facing children who might have compromised immunities, nutritional deficits and formal learning gaps.
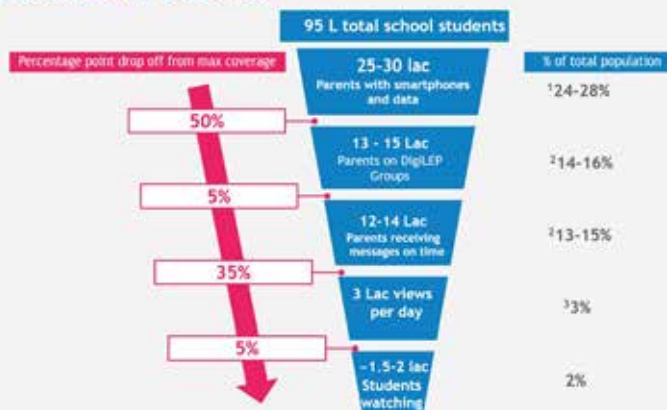
In the initial few days or weeks of the lockdown, parents, families, communities and even all philanthropic organisations were overwhelmed by the immediacy and horror of lost livelihoods,

of worrying about the next meal. For millions in India, in addition to the struggle of finding food for hungry mouths, there was the challenge of finding the means to reach their distant village or small-town home from a faraway and suddenly alien and unfriendly metro city. Children and schooling were largely forgotten.

Then, as months passed and the summer vacations were nearing an end with still no end in sight of the pandemic tunnel, panic set in. Many private educational institutions started considering e-learning and, since then, most of the high-end and middle-of-the-spectrum private schools have been conducting regular online classes. This has further divided the haves and have-nots, especially in the rural stretches of the country. The lack of infrastructure in villages, much less in their own houses, for any kind of e-learning further deprived the already marginalised children going to government schools.

The following data, shared by *Rajya Shiksha Kendra*, Bhopal and Sustainable Action for Transforming Human Capital (SATH) – a *Niti Aayog* initiative supporting digital learning in MP – reveals the dismal state of affairs when it comes to reaching out to government school students through digital media. It clearly points out that only about 30

Despite good efforts at multiple fronts, our reach still remains only 2% of total students of the state

percent of the parents of government school-going students own smartphones. Further, the actual reach/usage of the material being sent through the Digital Learning Enhancement Programme (DigiLEP) is only about two percent of the total government school student population.

Add to this the inability of a large number of parents and other adults to support their wards in the expectations of the digital learning processes and the deprivation of government school students increases exponentially.

Making each neighbourhood a school

Lament time is over. It is now important that we find innovative ways to address this challenge.

Working with over 60,000 children and around 2000 government school teachers spanning the rural stretches of MP and Maharashtra, *Eklavya* teams were struck by this sudden challenge of not being able to reach out to students. The summer months are usually full of hectic activities, like summer camps for students and teachers, training workshops for teachers and the youth in villages who are supporting educational initiatives, etc. However, the teams started interacting with teachers as early as May 2020, even during the lockdown phase. These interactions were mostly built around the challenges the teachers were facing in different COVID duties being entrusted to them, together with their own learning needs in these challenging times. These interactions also threw up very similar and disheartening images as most of the teachers had been entrusted with the duty of ensuring their students' digital learning and were quite frustrated in trying, with very little success, to connect with them through cell phones.

This interaction with government school teachers and our dialogue with the *Rajya Shiksha Kendra* (RSK, MP) brought into focus the great digital divide we are living in and re-emphasised the need to reach out to children in a face-to-face manner. In a series of meetings at the state level, the RSK team along with a few invited NGOs working in education, jointly worked out a campaign called the *Hamara Ghar-Hamara Vidyalaya* (HGHV), in which teachers would visit their neighbourhoods and work with parents in extending formal schooling activities to children.

Within the HGHV campaign was mooted the idea of *mohalla* or neighbourhood classes – an idea that *Eklavya* had already successfully tried out in few of

our field areas and hence, advocated strongly.

Building on experiences

Shiksha Protsahan Kendras (SPKs) are community-based learning centres that bring formal education to the most marginalised first-generation school-goers to provide them with the academic support that is needed to sustain them in mainstream schools. The SPK centres have been a model of reaching meaningful learning experiences to children from the wage-labourer, landless agricultural labourer, *dalit* and *adivasi* families in remote rural areas. Since education is not the sole result of schooling and has a lot to do with the home, parental, sibling and neighbourhood support, an SPK serves to create community-based nurturing in places where children are deprived of home support.

The second and long-term objective of the SPKs is to positively impact the teaching-learning processes as well as the overall functioning of government schools. To achieve this, an active, cooperative relationship is fostered between the SPK in a village and the local, government school teachers.

A local village youth is selected by the parent's committee formed to run an SPK. These youth facilitators regularly carry out two hours of teaching-learning work in the SPKs. Community ownership of the SPK is built from the start and monthly parents' meetings are organised in every SPK centre. Parents of the children coming to SPK attend this and discuss issues such as their child's monthly educational progress, the reasons of irregularity or late-coming of some children, role of parental support in their child's education, attendance of parents in the monthly meetings, the functioning of the village school and school teacher, the place for stories and storybooks in a child's learning, etc.

Mohalla Learning Activity Centre

As the health and safety measures forecast is that schools may remain closed for the better part of the academic session 2020-21 and large congregations of children and group activities are totally unadvisable, we at *Eklavya* decided to go back to the system of neighbourhood schooling and decentralised the SPKs further by taking it to each locality/hamlet where children reside.

Thus, emerged the idea of a *Mohalla Learning Activity Centre* (*Mohalla* LAC), a comfortable

learning space in the immediate vicinity of the child to continue engagement with meaningful and joyful learning experiences, scaffolded by either an older sibling, local youth or a young parent.

Mohalla LACs are held in open or well-ventilated spaces within the neighbourhood or village with a maximum of about fifteen children of the elementary school level invited to attend. Where the numbers are bigger, to ensure a smaller number per batch and appropriate physical distancing and other safety precautions, the LACs have more batches. The *Mohalla* LACs function for two hours daily from Monday to Friday. Saturdays are utilised for planning and review of the previous week and capacity-building of the facilitators

The initial investment is a small mobile library (a set of books for the facilitator to refer to and give reading exposure to children), a set of few necessary teaching-learning materials (TLMs) and the bare minimum of stationery. The emphasis is on developing the capacities of the facilitator towards the use of everyday materials as learning engagement tools – so that dependence on external TLMs is minimised and the ideas of learning from the environment by doing and from each other are fostered.

Our experience from the approximately 430 *Mohalla* LACs that we are now running in MP and about 40 in Maharashtra tells us that the most crucial and immediate need is to help children get out of their homes and meet their peers and deal with the prolonged stress that they have undergone.

Children who study in government schools come from some of the most socio-economically marginalised families. Stress has been high in these families for many months – leading to both oppressive and depressive circumstances within households. The *Mohalla* LAC space allows children to get away from these stressful situations at home and be with peers, express themselves by talking, writing and drawing their experiences of the lockdown and more. As they are conducted in the neighbourhood, parents often drop in to check what children are up to in these *mohalla* classes! They find their wards engaged in fun activities dealing with basic reading-writing and numeracy.

Since the RSK has also accepted the idea of *mohalla* classes, teachers in many villages have come forward to support these and a synergy is being developed between the government school teachers and the local youth.

Shahpur, Betul District, Madhya Pradesh

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Sangakheda, Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh

Khedla, Hoshangabad, District, Madhya Pradesh

Shahpur, Betul District, Madhya Pradesh

Children as torchbearers

From the start, some precautionary best practices are being followed in the classes that could lead to developing a behaviour change in children. Some notable changes:

- As small closed spaces are like hothouses for the virus, the *Mohalla* LACs are held either in open spaces or well-ventilated rooms.

- Wearing masks is compulsory for all students and facilitators.

- Soap, clean water and clean cotton towels are provided in each *Mohalla* LAC and everybody washes hands for 20-30 seconds on entering and leaving the class.

- Physical distance is maintained during all activities.

Practising these procedures like a drill on a daily basis, children have now become the messengers of change in their households too.

Engaging with the community

It is well-known that parents and the community have a large and important role to play in the education of their children. It is just that the present scenario makes us realise this fact even more starkly. In the absence of a formal structure like the school, the time is ripe to look at learning beyond the school building and the designated subjects. The importance of community engagement in educational processes has been a central idea of *Eklavya's* work in education. And our long practice of this has given us the necessary readiness to adapt quickly to the challenges of the COVID situation and implement the *Mohalla* LAC idea.

Through a process of dialogue with the parents' committees set up for the running of the *Mohalla* LACs and the local school teachers, these community bodies are now being entrusted with the responsibilities of reviewing the day-to-day functioning of the *Mohalla* LACs. Awareness is also being spread for bringing in the most marginalised children of returning migrant families into the fold of *Mohalla* LACs and subsequently enrolling them in the local village schools.

These community forums have become a platform for sharing of COVID-related information about ways of keeping the virus at bay along with the rationale behind the various precautions being taken.

There are other messages exchanged in the community related to education, such as enhancing home-based activities which children can do with a little guidance from parents, maintaining a schedule for children even though there is no school and setting up a small study corner for children even in a hutment.

Salutary results

All of this has led to:

- Parents building up their engagement in the learning of their children, making homes places of positive engagement to rediscover childhood and learning.

- Building a young community cadre who willingly give time to support children's learning by convening village-level learning centres, calling for meetings with parents and teachers and together creating conditions in the village to enable each home in every neighbourhood becoming a school.

As the school system faces prolonged closure, the *Mohalla* LAC effort has constructed a new social infrastructure with an embedded teacher-community connect. It has created a platform for communities not only to come together to ensure learning for elementary students but also to learn and adopt protective measures against the pandemic and build neighbourhood, hamlet-level resilience.

In contrast to urban settings, rural areas face low COVID caseloads, have low population densities and dispersed habitations, as well as a significantly lesser infection spread. Hence, the social bubble of the villages offers opportunities for the community-led education approach to mitigate the negative impact on children with the closing of schools. It may well be time for urban centres to pay attention and learn from the example of villages.

Vejavane, Khed, Pune District, Maharashtra

Photo credits: Amarwati, Ankit Lilhare, Akash, Nanda, Khemprakash, Sarita Abhang

Tultul Biswas coordinates the Teacher Education, Outreach & Advocacy programme of *Eklavya*. She is part of the team engaged in designing learning opportunities, workshops, short courses for teachers and grassroots-level education activists and bring about change in classroom practices. With a Master's degree in Chemistry and Sociology, Tultul has been with the organization for almost three decades, earlier working with its flagship children's magazine, *Chakmak*. She has a keen interest in folk and classical music. She can be reached at tultulbiswas@yahoo.com