Addressing the new abnormal

COVID response for visually impaired teachers in schools for the blind

By Supriya Dey from Vision Empower Trust

Schools for the visually impaired in Karnataka employ many teachers who are visually impaired themselves. Due to the COVID-19 situation, teachers and children in residential schools for the blind were sent home. The task was not easy. It was an unforeseen situation. A school volunteer even shared with us that parents from rural Karnataka complained to the school authorities that they did not have enough ration for the additional unplanned family member! The school supported by packing ration for the family and children to take home. Soon, schools in Karnataka started conducting online classes over various digital platforms. The digital divide was more glaring than ever. Special schools for the blind were not able to conduct any classes since the teachers are not familiar with the various platforms, and neither are all platforms accessible to people with visual impairment. Besides the sudden constraints imposed due to the pandemic, the problem was heightened by the lack of awareness among school administrators and resource providers about accessible technology options and its use. Smartphones these days come with basic accessibility features such as talkback. Still, it is a Herculean task for persons with visual impairment to explore the device independently, and it is impractical to expect them to use them further to teach. Also, visually impaired students require additional devices and apps to connect on the calls. In one school, barring a few students in Grade 10, whose parents have specifically procured smartphones for this purpose, the rest have no access.

Vision Empower (VE) has been working with teachers with blindness on Science and Math and Early Childhood Numeracy and Digital Literacy through Project VICT (Computational Thinking for Persons with Visual Impairment). Our experience shows that visually impaired teachers of primary school and middle school are the most impacted. For VE, the lockdown added new challenges to the execution of training sessions. The plan for traveling to schools and organizing centralized capacity building workshops had to be postponed, and the team had to draw up a plan to do this online. The teachers were in unknown locations, and we did not know their current levels of digital literacy. Also, we did not have approval from the school management and did not know if the teachers owned smartphones. Besides, within the VE team, we lacked the experience to provide online training. The entire team was suddenly Working From Home in various parts of the country.

In April 2020, it seemed imperative that we create a user group of teachers on a digital platform and provide them training. We identified a few teachers from our earlier interventions who had smartphones and created a group and an expert-led audio tutorial to install apps. We expected that they could try to follow the instructions and respond to the group within a week. To our dismay, the teachers neither responded to the group nor called back. Some of the teachers even stopped responding to our calls. And some exited the group. They did not see the purpose or considered it worth the effort. They told us that even responding to the group was an arduous task. They were uncomfortable with English and using technology. The VE team recognized the need to make modifications to the method of the intervention. If we were to enable them on online teaching methods, first we had to ensure we could ourselves find a way to train them online.

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We reached out to the Directorate for Welfare of Differently Abled, Karnataka, for permission to work with the special schools, understand, and support them in addressing the basic communication problems using digital devices. It was clear that the state was happy to find a group interested in tackling some of these formidable challenges. With prompt support from the Directorate and co-operation from the school principals, we called the schools to understand their requirements and find ways to help them. We then engaged daily with eight school-nominated, visually-impaired teachers of Grades 4, 5 and 6 from various schools we work with across Karnataka over phone calls to explain the Science and Math Teacher Instruction Kits. This helped as a testbed to understand the possible approaches to engage further with the teachers, their attention span, their real pedagogical needs, and personal challenges in handling smartphones. From the data collected, we arrived at three groups based on their current skill levels on Digital Literacy – Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced. After deliberation on the participants' capabilities and their current needs, we decided to select the teachers at the Intermediate level for the pilot intervention. The beginners needed hand-holding quite literally with the smartphone,

and the advanced users could be given online teaching material directly.

We created the tutorials in Kannada, covering basic app installation on the mobile, and continue to create tutorials on the most frequently required apps for communicating with students and conducting classes. The duration of each tutorial is less than 20 minutes to cater to the average attention span of the user, as revealed by our interactions with them. Since we needed a way to reach as many teachers, and eventually, students, the broadcast mechanism with follow up calls was agreed upon. In addition to the expert tutor, a visually impaired Kannada-speaking field assistant is now supporting the teachers regularly on their doubts.

The teachers require us to provide them as much support as we can to structure their classes with their students, and we have barely begun. Much more lies ahead. The teachers, being visually challenged, will need support in face-to-face meetings to fully resolve any glitches in working with the teacher instruction kits that we have provided. The weekly visits to schools will be useful to observe the kits' efficacy in real-time and along with other feedback from teachers and help us learn to move forward in this area of our work. ●●●

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Building bonds with rural students

Creating a remote volunteer network to support the learning of rural students

By Simple Education Foundation Team

Photographs from the Volunteer Induction Program. Photo by SEF

We are six-months-old in the world of technology-enabled learning. Whether it is via the internet or a simple telephone call, we are learning to navigate through this new world and ensure that our children are supported at every step of their learning journey.

As the pandemic tightened its claws over India around March of 2020, we were unsure of how to tackle the situation at hand. SEF had never fully dived into the world of education technology, and hence we were not sure of the tools and practices that supported a strong technology-led intervention. Even if we would figure that out, we still had to ensure a completely remote structure to enable the adoption.

The team was worried yet focused on finding a way out of the situation. As we discussed possibilities, one question that kept coming back was: "What do we want for our children at this moment?" We unanimously responded 'Well-being' and 'Safety'. Over the next few weeks, we focused on onboarding partners who could help us ensure

that our children and their families have the basic essentials that they need to come out of the lockdown and the pandemic safe and healthy. We also sent out messages over phone calls and WhatsApp messages to ensure that our children and their families are safe.

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Once we had a grip on well-being and safety for our children, we focused on learning. We asked ourselves: "What can we do to ensure our children have access to continued learning opportunities?" While internet-enabled learning was the easy answer in the cities, it was meaningless for our children in Tehri Garhwal, where our rural intervention is located. Our children and their families in Tehri Garhwal did not have access to the internet or

smartphones, and most families shared just one feature phone between 3 and 5 people. With this as our lived reality, we knew that bridging the digital divide was not the question we needed to answer - we just needed to ensure access to high quality continued learning. And as we did that, solutions emerged.

Over the years we have been running a community learning center in the Government Senior Secondary School for children in the age group of 10 to 16. At the center, we have focused on remedial learning, computer education and access to diverse co-curricular activities that they otherwise do not have access to. The relationship that these children share with our team and the outcome that we have been able to achieve in this space over the last four years has reinforced our belief in the role of a caring adult in our children's lives, and we wanted to make that an anchor of our program design as we started designing our rural intervention amidst the pandemic.

In no time, our children built bonds with the volunteers. Some volunteers continued working with these students, many offering help to support us with other work. The sense of responsibility, connection, and compassion of volunteers towards the children they are working with was tremendous.

We reached out to a small group of friends and requested them to come onboard to participate in a pilot project, one that we hoped would enable us to reach out to our children in the villages. Equipped with ten volunteers and a network of village champions, we started delivering curated workbooks and then supporting these volunteers to call up our children and help them with these workbooks. The first few weeks of this pilot had a few teething challenges. Still, very soon, we understood that this is a model that will enable access to continued learning opportunities for our children, and we went ahead with that. As I write this, we have our third group of volunteers making phone calls to support our children. We have distributed more than 700 workbooks to 70+ students in the area and made more than 1500 phone calls to our students.

The choices we made while designing this program were anchored in the context and the needs of the children we work with. A volunteer program where college-going students and professionals from all over the country participated meant that our children will have access to an adult who can be their mentor, and in many cases, a role model for our children. Every household was equipped with at least one feature phone, and we wanted to build a human connection. So, we chose to do phone calls in the absence of video calling.

What further strengthened our belief is the shifts that we noticed within our volunteers and children. In no time, our children built bonds with the volunteers. Some volunteers

continued working with these students, many offering help to support us with other work. The sense of responsibility, connection, and compassion of volunteers towards the children they are working with was tremendous. Our children also showed up with excitement, sharing stories from their villages, and introducing the volunteers to their family and their pets. We were left in awe of the powerful connections that were built between our children and the volunteers.

As we look back at the last six months, the key enablers in our journey were:

- Asking tough questions and rooting ourselves in the well-being of our students;
- Ensuring that our children have access to a caring adult and focusing on building thriving connections, be it with their teachers or with the volunteers;
- Testing our practices and constantly learning from them.

In Charles Eisenstein's essay 'The Coronation', he asks, "For years, normality has been stretched nearly to its breaking point, a rope pulled tighter and tighter, waiting for a nip of the black swan's beak to snap it in two. Now that the rope has snapped, do we tie its ends back together, or shall we undo its dangling braids still further, to see what we might weave from them?"

I believe that by the end of this pandemic, we will have weaved a new reality for our children by staying true to our enablers. •••

You can reach out to SEF at connect@simpleeducationfoundation.org and mainak@simpleeducationfoundation.org

A window of opportunity

Library approach to reach out to children during the pandemic

By Surya Prakash Rai from Prayog

Children selecting books from the display Photo by Prayog

The coronavirus pandemic has opened a Pandora's box-full of challenges. Challenges not only to us personally, but also to children we work with - what must be happening to them, what socio-emotional difficulties might they be going through, and are we doing enough? The entire world started working to mitigate the health and livelihood issues, but what about the child's needs and education? What about children in rural areas, especially in a state like Bihar where most of the children have not seen the face of government schools for the past 8 to 10 months? How many households in rural Bihar have a TV or an android mobile handset with the capacity to recharge costly internet packs - a bare essential to continue with digital education? And is digital education the only way out? Are digital content and platforms even meant or designed to serve the purpose of lakhs of children studying in Government schools in a state like Bihar or elsewhere in the country? What exactly is the purpose of education? Is it not for the child to dream and think freely and enable them to make critical decisions? Or is it only for the sake of getting a degree?

At Prayog, in the past four years, we were focused on our library-based work in Government schools in Gopalganj, Bihar, but COVID-19 restrictions urged us to look beyond our borders, where we could reach out to the same set of children, but with a community approach.

Let's Read – a story reading initiative

- Children between 10-15 years of age
- 15 stories from Arvind Gupta's 'Toys' website, well-designed with questions by our team
- WhatsApp as a platform
- Participation: Children from nine districts

The first couple of months were the most challenging time for us as a team. All our operations were in Government schools, and suddenly with the closure, we had nothing to do. The team was missing interacting with children and teachers, but there was not much we could do. There was also strict policing that was being observed to control the spread of the virus, and no one could move out of their home, except for essentials. As a team, we agreed to do certain things in a limited way. We decided to read more books and prepare ourselves for any window of
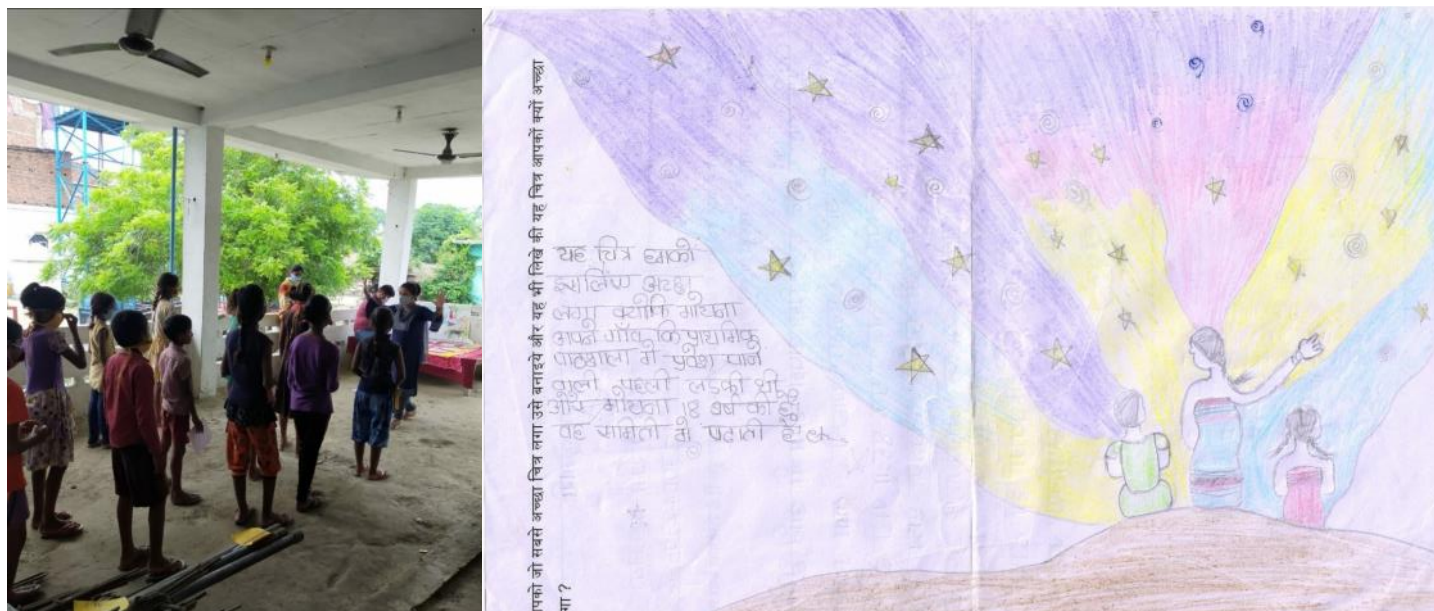
An ongoing library session activity (L), and a child's response in the worksheet (R) Photo by Prayog

opportunity to start reaching out to children with books. Our first breakthrough in intervening with children was through our initiative '*Let's Read.*' This was a story reading event. The responses from children and parents were quite encouraging.

While we are happy that we can engage with a select group of children and have created a platform for them, we worry about the children who do not have this opportunity.

This intervention was quite encouraging for the team. A suggestion came from a few teachers to meet the children after the first relaxation in lockdown and deliver the storybooks to them. During the *'Let's Read'* intervention, we had learned that children are missing interactions and love to read good stories. It was a good suggestion, but how could we go out at such times? That was the challenge before us. One approach that we took was keeping children as the focus of our discussion. We interacted with a few school principals of our intervention schools, and one of them got excited to introduce us to the local community. The community interaction was so revealing – parents, especially mothers, wanted something to be done for their children as they were doing nothing during the lockdown period. Parents loved the idea of lending books to their children. So, the Prayog team started our community library initiative in the catchment area of Khem Matihaniya Government Middle School in mid-July. Since then, we have been conducting weekly library sessions for about 80 children in the age group of 6-14, and children have shown an amazing response to this.

We got a big open space in the village from one of the residents because he was keen on doing something for the children of his village. Such responses from the community and children's participation are helping us in improving our initiative.

How does our community library flow continue?

- Selection of diverse books based on genre and age-group
- Preparing a ***response sheet*** for each of the storybooks displayed during the library session
- A ***'Lending card'*** where the child records the name of the book, date of borrowing, and date of return
- Focused activities like ***read aloud*** and ***book talks***
- In small groups of a maximum of 3-4, children ***visit the book display*** which is at the library site, selects the book of his/her choice, marks it in the lending card, and return to their homes
- They ***keep the book*** for 3-4 days and write their responses in the worksheet
- ***Evaluation*** of the child's responses/worksheet by the Prayog team helps to understand more about the relationship between books and the child and help us improve our library program

While we are happy that we can engage with a select group of children and have created a platform for them, we worry about the children who do not have this opportunity. The government has a wonderful setup and a mammoth force of teachers who were engaged in an essential task during the same period -- distributing food grains. There were ways to use this force, with all due precautions, to engage with children at the local level, but we missed this opportunity. There is a need to translate some learning of small initiatives to a larger scale – but who will do this? Is the civil society enough to cater to this solution and reach out to lakhs of children who have missed many such interactions by many organizations? ●●●

You can reach out to Prayog at contact@prayog.org.in and surya@prayog.org.in. To learn more, visit: https://prayoginbihar.blogspot.com/, or https://www.facebook.com/PrayoginBihar

पत्रिका: पाठशाला - भीतर और बाहर

पा*ठशाला भीतर और बाहर* अज़ीम प्रेमजी विश्वविद्यालय द्वारा प्रकाशित शिक्षा के सामाजिक सरोकारों, उसकी समाज व स्कूली ढाँचे से अंतःक्रिया पर केन्द्रित हिन्दी में लिखी व छापी जा रही पत्रिका है।

पत्रिका का एक मुख्य उद्देश्य – शिक्षकों, शिक्षक प्रशिक्षकों, ज़मीनी कार्यकर्ताओं व शिक्षा से सरोकार रखने वाले सभी व्यक्तियों और संस्थाओं के लिए शिक्षा पर हिन्दी में विचार-विमर्श का एक ऐसा मंच उपलब्ध कराना है जिससे उनके अनुभव व आवाज़ें शिक्षा के विमर्श को गहन व यथार्थपरक बना सकें। दूसरा महत्त्वपूर्ण उद्देश्य है- शिक्षकों व ज़मीनी स्तर के अन्य शिक्षा कर्मियों को चिन्तन व मनन के मौके देना व उन तक अन्य साथियों के अनुभव व उनके विश्लेषण पहुँचाकर उनके कार्य को बेहतर बनाने में उनकी मदद करना।

पाठशाला भीतर और बाहर में स्कूली शिक्षा, जिसमें पूर्व-प्राथमिक, प्राथमिक, माध्यमिक व उच्च माध्यमिक स्तर तक की शाला शिक्षा पर लेख रखे जाते हैं। हालांकि प्राथमिकता पूर्व प्राथमिक से लेकर आरंभिक शिक्षा और शिक्षक-शिक्षा के विविध पहलुओं पर मननशील सामग्री छापने को दी जाती है। इनमें शामिल हैं ऐसे लेख जिनमें शिक्षा के विविध विषयों के परिप्रेक्ष्य से जुड़े ठोस अनुभव व गहनता से पड़ताल किए गए विचार होते हैं, कक्षा अनुभव होते हैं, शिक्षणशास्त्र यानी विषयों की विषयवस्तु को पढ़ाने के तौर तरीकों पर विमर्श होता है, शिक्षकों के प्रशिक्षण, उनकी तैयारी और उनके काम से संबन्धित लेख होते हैं। मूलतः स्कूली शिक्षा के समकालीन और ज्वलंत विषयों पर विमर्श से जुड़े लेख होते हैं। प्रकाशन के लिए लेख चुनते समय

> **पत्रिका का एक महत्त्वपूर्ण मकसद शिक्षकों व शिक्षा के विशेषज्ञ माने जाने वाले लोगों के बीच संवाद का मंच बनना है। हमारा मानना है कि जमीनी स्तर से विश्लेषण सहित आ रहे मननशील अनुभवों से शिक्षा में शोध का दायरा विस्तृत होगा व नयी समझ व ज़्यादा व्यवहारिक दृष्टिकोण का विकास होगा।**

ध्यान रखा जाता है कि लेख विषयों में नवीनता लिए हुए, गहन विचारशील, तर्कपूर्ण, विश्लेषणपरक, प्रमाण आधारित हों।

इनके अलावा शिक्षा और उसके व्यापक दायरों से सम्बन्धित अच्छी किताबों और फिल्मों की समीक्षाएँ, शिक्षकों से साक्षात्कार और सुविचारित मसलों पर शिक्षाकर्मियों के बीच हुए संवाद और उनके साक्षात्कार भी प्रकाशन के लिए चुने जाते हैं।

पत्रिका का एक महत्त्वपूर्ण मकसद शिक्षकों व शिक्षा के विशेषज्ञ माने जाने वाले लोगों के बीच संवाद का मंच बनना है। हमारा मानना है कि जमीनी स्तर से विश्लेषण सहित आ रहे मननशील अनुभवों से शिक्षा में शोध का दायरा विस्तृत होगा व नयी समझ व ज़्यादा व्यवहारिक
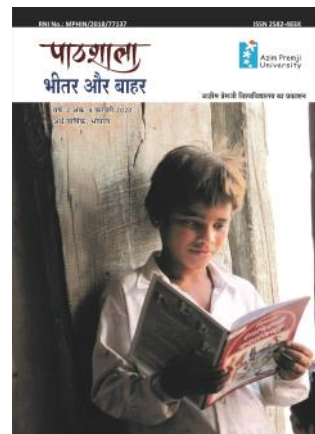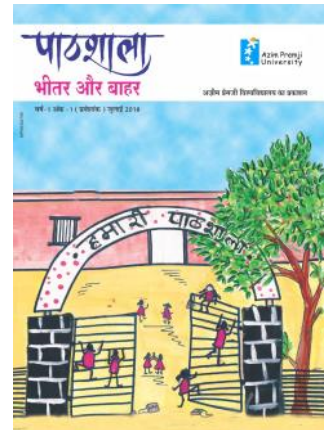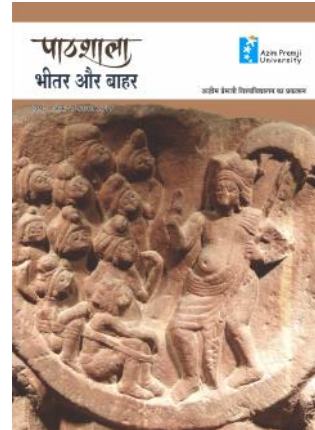
दृष्टिकोण का विकास होगा। पत्रिका के लिए आए लेखों का गहन परीक्षण विभिन्न अध्येताओं व ज़मीन पर काम कर रहे अनुभवी शिक्षाकर्मियों द्वारा किया जाता है। इस प्रक्रिया में लेखक अथवा परीक्षणकर्त्ता की पहचान परस्पर उजागर नहीं की जाती। परीक्षणकर्त्ता लेख भेजने वालों को उनके प्रयासों पर सुधार हेतु फीडबैक व सुझाव देते हैं। अभी तक पाठशाला के पाँच अंक प्रकाशित हो चुके हैं जिनमें शिक्षा के व्यापक पहलुओं पर 90 लेख शामिल किए गए हैं। ●●●

ये अंक अज़ीम प्रेमजी विश्वविद्यालय / फाउण्डेशन की साईट पर उपलब्ध हैं। पाठशाला से सम्बन्धित अन्य जानकारी के लिए pathshala@apu.edu.in पर सम्पर्क कर सकते हैं।

https://azimpremjifoundation.org/foundation-publication

Book Review *by Thejaswi Shivanand*

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Teachers
The Heroes of Real India | Author: S. Giridhar

What do I know about a teacher's life?' How many of us have asked this question? If you are a parent, you are probably more concerned with questions of your child's grades, their homework load, their persistent dry cough, whether they have had enough food, their job prospects, or combinations of the above depending on where you are in stages of life and socio-economic hierarchy. You may be concerned if a teacher fails to take a class, but more from your child's learning goals than the teacher's life circumstances. If you are not a parent, you may have a distant and benign view of the teacher, tinged with sadness, failure, and sacrifice, as someone who belongs to a' noble profession.'

There is a tendency, all too human, to bracket all teachers together in a uniform and somewhat amorphous category and associate various stereotypes with their professional lives. Is teacher absenteeism really at an all-time high? Are all teachers lazy and stuck in their professional growth? Are teachers more concerned about their home-life than children learning in schools? These are some common questions casually thrown around when conversations turn to teachers and schools in the country.
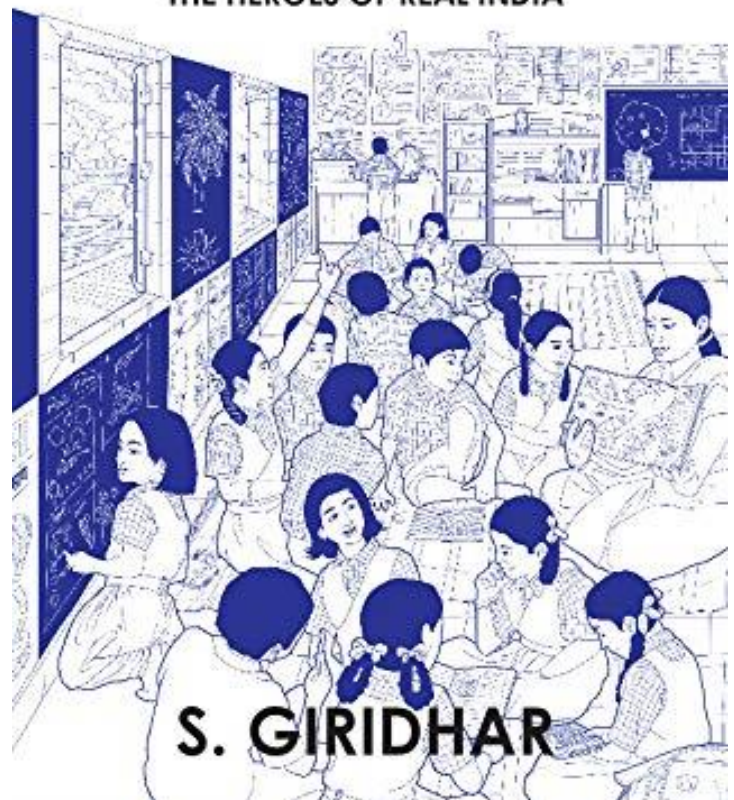
Are we aware of the diversity of schools where teachers work in this country, the diversity of landscapes and geographies that they inhabit, and the communities they serve? Do we know the range of competencies, skills, and training they bring to their work? Have we indeed considered the challenges of working with school education systems that involve rigid structural and functional hierarchies? How often have we thought of the motivation for a teacher to engage with the same curriculum, year-on-year, sometimes for decades on end? S. Giridhar's 'Ordinary People, Extraordinary Teachers' attempts to open some of these questions of interest to the public and those of us in the field of education.

> **This book is likely to be received positively from education practitioners as it serves to highlight the challenges that are involved in the work of the teacher while describing the variable nature of the challenge.**

The book circumscribes itself only to include glimpses of the lives of teachers from government schools, opening with an impassioned plea for the state education system as an essential pillar delivering equitable access to education across a diverse nation. This focus on government-school teachers, and the themes that the book tackles make it a landmark publication in its scope and reach. The author strives to capture slices of the teachers' lives in a series of thematic sections on leadership, reflective practice, equity and quality, and teamwork, each foregrounding teachers' abilities and learning journeys in that area. There are four to five short 'case studies' presented and an introduction and conclusion to each thematic section. Every case study is of a teacher or a group of teachers, some aspects of the location and circumstances under which they work, and the unique perspective that the teacher(s) bring to their work.

For example, the story of Shoorvir Singh Kharola, the science teacher from Model Upper Primary school in Laata, Uttarakhand. This account, like most others in the

book, begins with a description of the school, the rural community, and teachers there and goes on to describe Kharola's approach to teaching science with local resources and context. The infectious enthusiasm that he brings to teaching translates to blending concepts in math and science seamlessly for the school's children. On a bench is the cross-section of a tree; a hint of mischief is clear on his face as Kharola asks us to estimate the age of the tree. When we flounder, he shows us the correct way to count the rings on the transverse section of the trunk and gives us another chance. 'I planted this tree, and I was here when it was cut, so who but I should know the answer!' With a laugh, he puts us out of our discomfiture. This example serves to illustrate Giridhar's approach in documenting teachers' professional lives - curious about their circumstances, respectful of their experience while being thoughtful and sympathetic to their daily challenges.

This book is likely to be received positively from education practitioners as it serves to highlight the challenges that are involved in the work of the teacher while describing the variable nature of the challenge. The teacher is answerable to a trifecta of the state, the parent, and the child. What this often means is that the teacher must juggle election duties and consistent demands of data from the state, with parental anxieties or indifference, and the child's presence and learning in the classroom. The author's approach is to slowly help us build a picture of resolute individuals who work in the face of these multiple, competing demands of space and time.

Giridhar gathered these observations, a selection of which are presented in the book, over two decades of meeting these teachers across the country in the course of his work at the Azim Premji Foundation. A long-term observer of the system at work might end up with a very different view of the system from the author's if the locus of observation was structural rather than individual. This book is, therefore, instructive and informative in both its content and approach to looking at teachers in the state education systems in the country.

In the past decades and the current moment, the only substantive experience of equity in school education across this country is through the state schools. This system is today being threatened on multiple fronts – the low annual government spending on education, the burgeoning presence of low-fee paying private schools across the country in urban and rural areas, the poor-quality teacher training and capacity building courses, and several other fronts – that risk the closure of these schools on grounds such as low student intake, high costs and low recruitment of teachers. In such a situation, one hopes that reading these stories of hope, enterprise, and rootedness in communities will bring back attention to the reasons why these systems work despite the daunting slopes confronting them and how these teachers work the magic. While this book does not make any lofty claim of these individual actors in a large unwieldy and leaky ship,

it is not much of a leap to see that they are essential to plug the leaks, to sustain a pluralistic democracy informed by constitutional values which we have all agreed to co-create and participate in. This makes it our duty as citizens to recognize their work and nurture them in the long run. ●●●

Learning as we go

COVID-19 adversities are pushing nonprofits to adapt to new processes and technology

Over the last 8-9 months, nonprofits were forced to review their strategies, take stock of their resources and situation, evaluate, understand team dynamics, and hit the pedal. Given that most grassroots organizations depend heavily on people to connect, the challenges posed by COVID lockdowns, especially the restricting of people's movement, meant that nonprofits must change their approach in implementing programs.

Technology has played a critical role in enabling organizations to reach out to the beneficiaries. Although many organizations continue to have reservations and doubts about adopting new technology and integrating it with the core program, it has many advantages.

Himachal Pradesh-based Aavishkaar's team took an early call on converting their Science and Math content that was earlier delivered face to face to the online mode.

Sandhya from Aavishkaar says, "We were averse to doing things online. But after COVID, we had to do an immediate switch. We started with open sessions at first and found that the demand for open sessions was huge. Our in-person sessions were usually restricted to 25 people, but for the online sessions, we were having up to 100 people sign up."
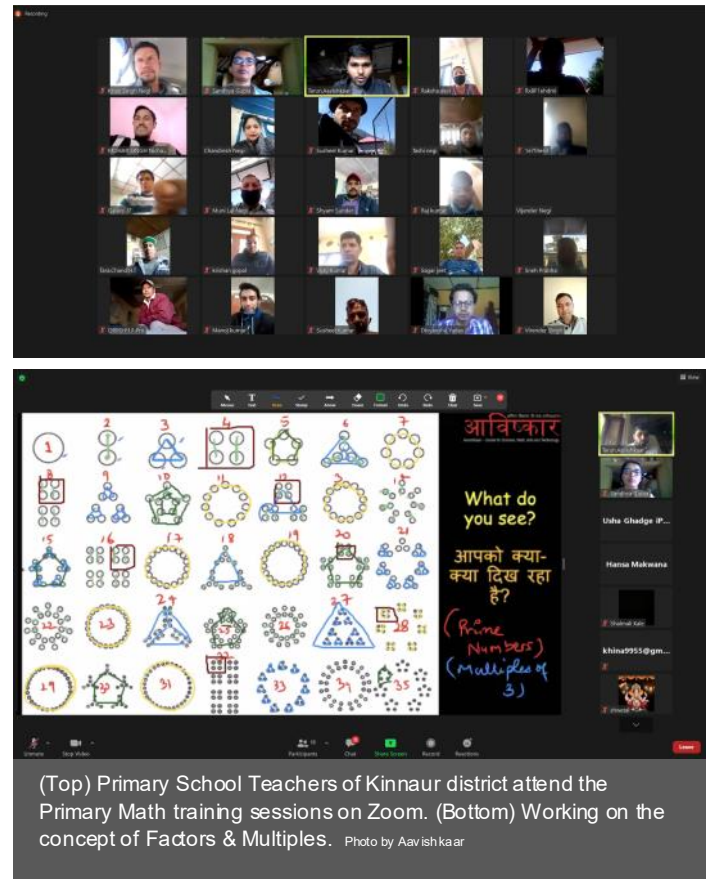
(Top) Primary School Teachers of Kinnaur district attend the Primary Math training sessions on Zoom. (Bottom) Working on the concept of Factors & Multiples. Photo by Aavishkaar

Founders of the organization are generally motivated. There is entrepreneurial zeal, so we love to experiment. But the team may take time to realise that vision...

- Sandhya from Aavishkaar

Aavishkaar: Center for Science, Arts, and Technology aims to make learning a fun and hands-on experience for all irrespective of their social or economic background. They work on spreading the culture of science and scientific inquiry in our schools and colleges.

Changing the math and science teacher training content for the online mode has proved beneficial for many teachers. The Aavishkaar team started with an estimate to reach 1200 teachers in 12 districts of Himachal Pradesh through their five-day program but reached 1500 teachers, including middle school science teachers, middle school maths teachers, and primary school mathematics teachers.

Immediately after the lockdown, the Aavishkaar team started working on building the capacity of the team. Those team members who were good with content delivery were also encouraged to support content creation
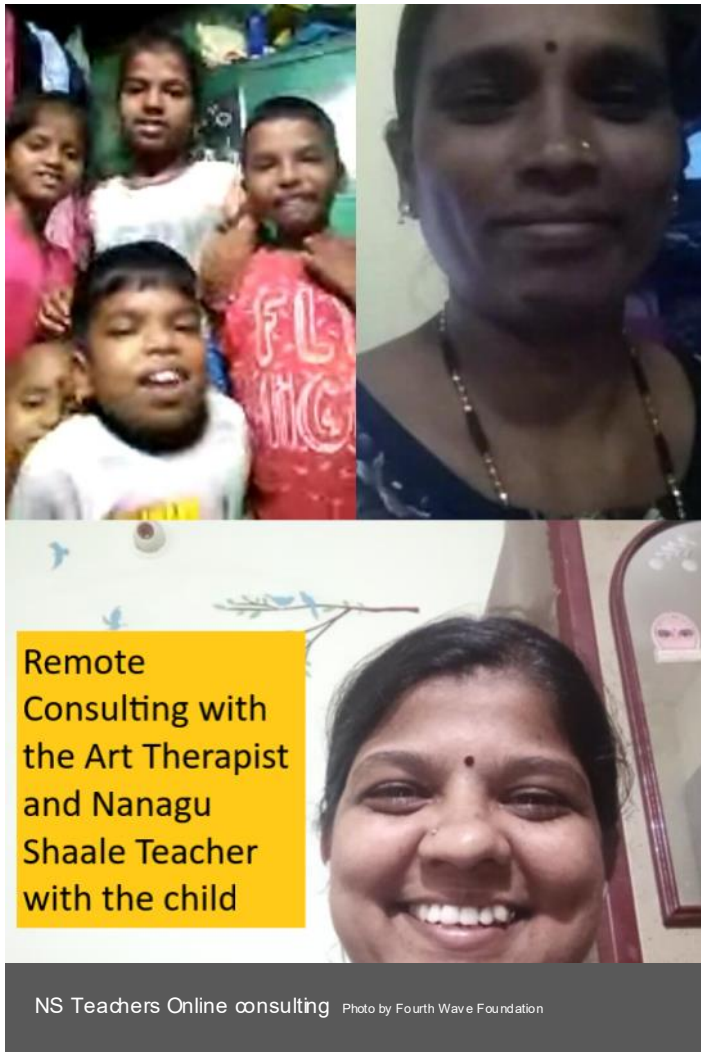
and add on to their skills. The content creation process itself took an innovative approach to explore concepts at hand.

Sandhya says, "In addition to studying science and math, we also studied scientists and mathematicians of today. For example, exploring the work of Fields Medal honorary Maryam Mirzakhani, studying her contribution to math, and presenting it to the whole group— this can be very inspiring for the children and make them understand that someone from among us can also be a mathematician."

One of the critical challenges that the organization's founders faced in the early days of the lockdown were keeping the team motivated.

Sandhya says, "Founders of the organization are generally motivated. There is entrepreneurial zeal, so we love to experiment. But the team may take time to realise that vision. We could have either seen this as a limitation or an opportunity. We thought this is our chance to implement things that nobody would have wanted. So, let us see it as an opportunity, try new ideas, and see if they work."

One of the benefits of using technology was that Aavishkaar was also able to collect feedback from teachers during and after training. The online mode of

Remote Consulting with the Art Therapist and Nanagu Shaale Teacher with the child

NS Teachers Online consulting Photo by Fourth Wave Foundation

years, I never thought that I would see a loss of life because of hunger."

The Fourth Wave Foundation team moved fast when it came to delivering their program and started a connectivity audit of their beneficiaries. Their volunteers would go to the children to see what kind of devices (smartphones/tabs) they had and, if required, procured devices, and enabled data connection.

On our mainstay work, we feel we have done justice. We were used to remote functioning and connecting doctors from Bengaluru to families in rural areas through our center. And after lockdowns, we tried to address the challenge of how we can enable last-mile delivery.

- Diana from Fourth Wave Foundation

Diana says, "On our mainstay work, we feel we have done justice. We were used to remote functioning and connecting doctors from Bengaluru to families in rural areas through our center. And after lockdowns, we tried to address the challenge of how we can enable last-mile delivery."

One of the critical aspects of functioning and last-mile delivery was keeping the team motivated. About 30-40% of Fourth Wave's team works remotely. And most of the team works from rural regions and on small devices. The rural lifestyle is not particularly suited for Work from Home as there can be many disturbances and not having a dedicated place to work with undivided attention.

Diana says, "We haven't managed to work with full capacity remotely. But we ensure that we dedicate at least a day or two every week to keep the team motivated and give them tips on working from home, on taking calls, etc. We now have an obligation to keep them motivated so that delivery of services remains consistent."

Incidentally, online delivery of services has had a good outcome so far as parents of children are now more engaged in their activities.

Diana says, "Earlier, we were more concerned about the classroom environment, but now we have clear video examples of how families support children. Our plans are based on learnings from the COVID experiences in terms of enabling learning material as online material post-COVID to more engage with the child. That is something that we did not foresee would happen."

The Fourth Wave team is working on challenges related to tracking a child's progress as most of their processes have gone online. While the team continues to visit families following COVID guidelines, the lack of hardware or devices to process this data directly into the system is an overhead as teachers must come to the center and share computers to enter data. The other small glitches that the

delivery also helped the team members ensure that their content is to the point and adheres to time limitations. As a next step, Aavishkaar plans to utilize its unused content, especially games relating to maths and science concepts, and put it on YouTube to create Teaching Learning Material (TLM) easily.

For the Karnataka-based Fourth Wave Foundation, the challenge was not in adapting to technology but enabling the last-mile delivery of the program for Children with Disabilities, supporting team members to get used to Work From Home, ensuring that beneficiaries do not have to struggle for food.

Fourth Wave Foundation works with Children with Disabilities in rural areas and runs educational programs focused on mainstreaming inclusion. Most parents of Children with Disabilities that Fourth Wave works with are farmworkers or daily wage workers. With the loss of livelihood and no money coming in, the situation is dire in most houses. COVID-19 lockdowns have added one more layer of complexity in nutrition and healthcare for Children with Disabilities.

Diana Joseph from Fourth Wave Foundation says, "The biggest challenge was not in delivering our services, but in ensuring that our kids are not going hungry. In my entire career of being in the development sector for the last 15-20

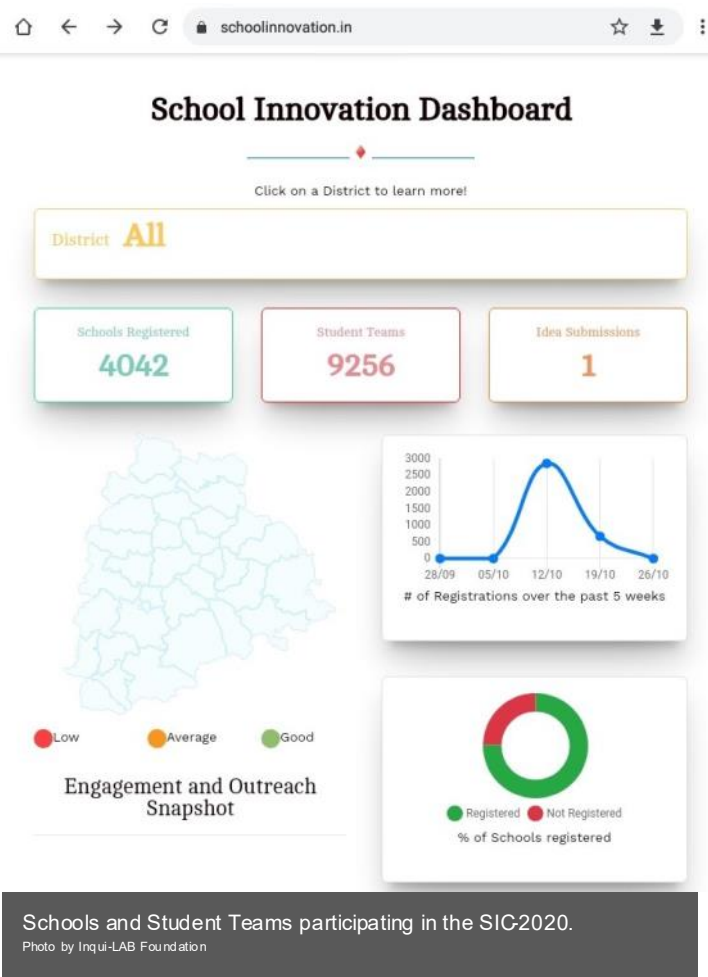Teachers facilitating online course module for students. Photo by Inqui-LAB Foundation

team faces include working using a small screen, screen sharing, using video conferencing tools, etc.
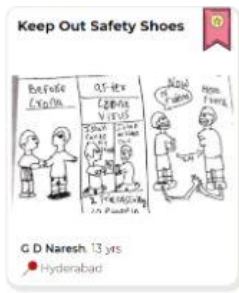
As of October 2020, 90% of children associated with the Fourth Wave Foundation are getting lessons delivered on the phone. In many cases, parents have gained access to phones through donations, or the panchayat has come forward to help such families. Many families are now seeing the benefits of having a device and have invested in a device.

Telangana-based Inqui-LAB Foundation, which designs platforms and interventions that transform student-learning spaces into places of creativity, design, and innovation, decided to pause their in-school core program when the lockdown started. They found that their students were not accessible; there was a loss of livelihood in communities they reached, and that the teachers were not getting paid.

Vivek from Inqui-Lab Foundation says, "Establishing a connection with the children was more important. We did not want to put them through a program or focus on learning objectives, but understand what they are feeling and their family's situation. In retrospect, it was a good decision to understand their situation. Later we started figuring out how we can engage with them productively."

As a young organization, Inqui-LAB also had to take a few tough decisions. The discussions were focused on allocating resources, ways to reach out to children, and strategizing.

Schools and Student Teams participating in the SIC-2020.
Photo by Inqui-LAB Foundation

Student ideas from WhatsApp engagement   Photo by Inqui-LAB Foundation

Vivek says, "We had to pause our plans to expand and to hire. We are lucky to have a strong team, and we did not have to face any logistics or resource issues. The team was able to quickly strategize and pivot to the online solutions and few community-related solutions to get in touch with the students."

The sudden shift to Work From Home posed its own set of challenges for the team as it was never a part of Inqui-LAB Foundation's work culture. Coordinating and aligning the team took some time and effort.

By August 2020, the team had launched an online application for Telangana School Innovation Challenge in partnership with the Telangana State Innovation Cell (TSIC), UNICEF India and Department of School Education, Telangana. The Challenge focuses on nurturing innovation and problem solving among students from grade 6 to grade 10. The interactive platform consists of 20 instructional videos and 12 Interactive assessments designed by the Inqui-Lab Foundation's program team. Students are encouraged to engage in the learning of the design process and submit their innovative idea for the 'Telangana School Innovation Challenge 2020' online.

The teachers are playing a pivotal role in encouraging children to participate. The Inqui-LAB Foundation team has so far trained more than 5000 teachers across all the 33 districts of Telangana who have completed the online module of the program and have a first-hand experience of what the students will learn.

At first, this program was designed to be implemented as an offline initiative with district coordinators going to school, but now the entire process, including evaluation, is online. More than 9000 student teams with more than 32000 students have signed up on the student portal and are completing the learning modules.

The process of developing this application also taught the

Inqui-Lab Foundation team new skills –online video content and assessments, and all related multimedia content was created with in-house support and using open -source tools.

The COVID-19 situation has pushed the team into a new direction, and a lot of learnings can be continued well into the future, feels Vivek.

"Until now, we were focusing on the schools as the primary channel to reach the children. But once that was broken, we did not have any other channel. We explored how we can integrate technology to deliver our program and directly reach the children, homes, and communities. We did not have any previous experience or expertise with this, but just because of the crisis, we got pushed to adapt quickly and navigate our way," he adds. ●●●

You can reach out to Aavishkaar at info@aavishkaar-palampur.org, Fourth Wave Foundation on info@fourthwavefoundation.org, and Inqui-LAB Foundation on info@inqui-lab.org.

Addressing food insecurity and migrant crisis in Chennai

Chennai-based Bhoomika Trust distributed ration kits to over 95,000 migrant workers and helped them find their way back home

Bhoomika Trust launched the 'Food First' initiative to ensure that daily wage earners had enough to eat during COVID-19 regulations. To reach out to the maximum affected people, the team worked closely with the Government channels to ensure that disadvantaged communities had enough to eat and access personal hygiene kits.

The Trust's initiative came as a big relief for migrants and the daily wage earners, auto drivers, electricians, painters, plumbers, construction workers, and women who work as domestic help in houses. The team was able to reach over 95,000 migrant and daily wage earners since the lockdown.

Aruna Subramaniam from Bhoomika Trust says, "Perumbakkam Slum Clearance Board Housing, a resettlement colony in the outskirts of Chennai, has over 15000 families and, from April 2020, most have been without jobs. Security guards have not been paid, and domestic helpers have received a small portion of salary or none."

> **We'll soon be starting an employment and skill mapping initiative in Perumbakkam to further understand the impact and ideate on solutions with other stakeholders, as the Trust is looking to work on livelihood solutions**
>
> - Aruna from Bhoomika Trust

The Bhoomika team quickly reached out to the residents, networked with the association members, slum clearance board officials, block development officers, tahsildar, and started distributing ration kits supported by the Wipro Foundation grant.

Aruna says, "Many blocks were barricaded as containment blocks. With a lot of pre-planning to avoid crowding, our team interacted with the block presidents and handed over the kits to select representatives in each block over one week. We also distributed sanitation kits with reusable face masks, and soaps and detergent."

The Trust has a strong connection to this area post-Chennai floods, having built a school earlier for high school students. At present, the team is also working on building an 18000 ft primary school expected to be ready

Dry ration distribution Photo by Bhoomika Trust

by January 2021.

Aruna says, "The young children here have been using the housing blocks as a school. But the blocks are tiny, making it an ordeal for the teachers and the students to work comfortably."

Bhoomika Trust is also working on a pilot program that involves working with a cohort of children in each of the blocks. Remote volunteers connect primarily through smartphones, creating physical resources to facilitate peer learning.

Team Bhoomika also played a critical role in connecting with tens of thousands of migrants, specifically from Jharkhand and West Bengal. The team coordinated their travel back home on the Shramik special trains. .

The volunteers identified their locations, collected their details, and worked with Greater Chennai Corporation to bring them to the station where the Trust distributed sanitation kits and food packets to migrants traveling on the train.

Aruna says, "We'll soon be starting an employment and skill mapping initiative in Perumbakkam to further understand the impact and ideate on solutions with other stakeholders, as the Trust is looking to work on livelihood solutions." ●●●

You can reach out to Bhoomika Trust at office@bhoomikatrust.org

Cover Photo:
Children selecting books from a simple display, a practice that allows them to borrow the book of their choice for a week

Photo by Prayog, Bihar