

ON-THE-GROUND: IMPACT, RESPONSE & PERSPECTIVES



COVID-19 RESPONSE FROM ASHA

BY: PADMANAVA SEN,
ASHA-WIDE PROJECTS COORDINATOR

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns over the last year have caused great devastation amongst underprivileged and underserved populations across India. Many in these groups had their lives upended as they faced the loss of wages and food, supply shortages, the inability to access basic resources and much more. In 2020, with survival having become a paramount goal amongst many in rural and migrant communities, Asha for Education and its project partners pivoted to focus their efforts on helping meet the most basic needs of its community members by providing dry food rations and medical supplies. Padmanava Sen, director of the Asha Central Projects Team, provides an overview of Asha for Education's COVID-19 relief efforts.

Where Did Asha for Education Primarily Focus Its Support?

Asha for Education provided dry rations, especially in the form of rice, in rural communities in India. In special cases, hygiene-related items and emergency medical supplies were also provided.

Asha project partners had to become more proactive in their relief efforts since there were ration supply shortages caused by a broken supply chain.

Our Liason With the Local Government

Dry rations were provided to stranded migrant communities who did not have local ration cards and could not obtain food supplies. They were also provided in instances where the rations provided by the Government were not sufficient. Asha project partners had to become more proactive in their relief efforts since there were ration supply shortages caused by a broken supply chain (due to the public transport system no longer being operational during the pandemic). Asha partners worked to support the Government as well as the local police department while practicing adequate social distancing measures. In some cases, project partners even offered their own facilities for emergency preparedness.

How Were Project Areas With Migrant Worker Families Impacted?

The migrant workers in many areas did not have savings, any stock of food or cooking facilities to survive the long lockdown periods. Additionally, their daily wages had stopped from day 1 of the lockdown. In rural communities, the breakdown of the supply chain caused shortages of food and, in some cases, the shortage of state funds hindered the procurement of supplies

from the Central Government food storage facilities.

Where is Help Needed in the Long Run?

In the long run, depending on the spread of COVID-19 across India, gaps in food distribution need to be taken up by governmental bodies. A 'One Nation, One Ration Card' principle should be effectively followed. The supply chain should be reconstituted. Awareness campaigns for hygiene and social distancing, containing accurate facts about COVID-19, should be used to reduce panic and discrimination against people infected with the virus. The migrant workers who have returned to their homes must be effectively integrated into the rural economy. The reverse migration can be utilized effectively to strengthen rural economies by using the existing skills of these migrant workers.



Post-Relief Education Strategy

For a year since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed. Most Asha projects work with students going to government schools. Different project partners tackled the issue of school closures differently. While some started mini schools (locally), some resumed limited operations and others focused on components that could be managed over the Internet. Maintaining hygiene and health safety awareness were key to running limited operations. For some projects, teachers had to extend hours of operations to accommodate distancing measures. Where possible, communications were conducted over phone calls. All events and communications involving big groups were canceled. Post-October, some level of normalcy was reached for a few projects. For an example, please refer to the Mini Schools article in this annual report.

Learnings from COVID-19

Most students with whom we work have no access to digital education or the Internet. They are also mostly first generation learners with no support at

home. In rural and urban setups, school closures have very different outcomes. In an urban setup, the schools and after-school centers act as a safe haven for most students with whom we work. They do not have a conducive environment to concentrate on studies in their homes (urban slums). Also, at home, they can be victims of domestic violence or forced labour. In rural settings, schools provide the nutrition needed in struggling rural communities. School attendance also acts as a tool to stop early marriage or girl trafficking. To summarize, without schools, students not only miss their mid-day meals but they also go without having a place where they can study and be happy. Relevant observations from the Asha Chennai team is documented [here](#).

The after-school programs of Asha played a vital role here during the pandemic and will continue to do so in the days to come. We have to continue to be very proactive to fill the gaps created by a year of closure. The digitization of education is not possible for all of the 300,000+ students with whom we work. However, classroom digital literacy may give the needed exposure to all students for future preparedness. Offline content distribution can also go a long way for students whose families can afford a second-hand smartphone. Preparedness and the adoption of working models will be the way to go to deal with future waves of COVID-19.

COVID-19: BY THE NUMBERS

Projects supported:

- Asha Darshan Trust
- Asha Mumbai Center
- Asha Trust - COVID-19 Relief
- Ashray Akuti
- Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha
- Bharathi Trust - COVID-19 Relief
- Bharathi Trust - Senchiamma School
- Bhumi
- Borderless World Foundation
- Champa Mahila Society
- Chehak Trust
- Chhotanagpur Adivasi Harijan Uthan Samiti
- Digambarpur Angikar
- Diksha Foundation - Khel Project
- Etasha Society - Prerna
- Ganjam District Orthopaedically Handicapped Welfare Association
- Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti
- Gramya Sansthan
- Human Uplift Trust - AIDS Orphans Edu Project
- India Sponsorship Committee
- Institute of Social Work
- Jagriti Bal Vikas Samiti
- Joint Operation for Social Help - COVID-19 Relief
- Kumarappa Institute of Gram Swaraj
- Mandra Lions Club
- Mukti
- Muskaan
- Parivaar Education Society
- Pneuma Trust - Home for Children
- Puvidham Rural Development Trust
- Rawa Academy of Art, Music and Dance - Adruta Children's Home
- Rural Development Trust
- Sabuj Sangha
- Sankalp Ek Prayas Society Bhilai
- Sirisha Rehabilitation Center
- Sivasri Charitable Trust - Sikshana
- Society for Education and Economic Development
- Society for Women in Rural Development
- Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement
- Vijay Foundation Trust - Aarti Home
- Vikasana Org for Education and Social Development
- Voluntary Association for Rural Upliftment and Networking - VARUN

Chapters involved:

- Austin
- Bangalore
- Chennai
- Chicago
- Cornell
- Danbury
- Delaware
- Houston
- Kansas City
- London
- Mumbai
- Purdue
- San Francisco
- Seattle
- Stanford
- Silicon Valley

Our impact:

20,000+ Families Supported

\$213K Disbursed

42 Projects

16 Chapters

Did you know?

In 2020, Asha for Education was ranked on [Charity Navigator](#) as a 'Top 6' Nonprofit organization for COVID-19 'Relief Supplies: Community Support & Services.'



CHALLENGES FACED BY PROJECT JAMGHAT

BY: JAVED USMANI & MANOJ BHATT,
JAMGHAT TEAM

When the Indian government announced a nationwide lockdown in March 2020, we had to close the Aangan Day Care Center and Ekjut, an employment center for women where they operate sewing machines. All the children who came to the daycare center for their meals and education, and also because it was a safe space, were unable to do so and were again forced to go out on to the streets and returned to begging, smoking, and indulging in substance abuse. A few children also got married off before the legal age of 18 years.

The women who were dependent on Ekjut could not earn any more. Prior to the lockdown, they used to stitch cloth hand bags and we would sell them to our big corporate supporters since Delhi has a mandate against using plastic shopping bags. During the lockdown, we tried to have them stitch masks from their homes, but we were unable to give them a stipend for their work as we used to do. Also, women who didn't have smartphones were unable to take online training sessions on product manufacturing conducted by a master tailor.



NGOs always struggle because of a shortage of funding. This was exacerbated by the lockdown since most of the money raised was directed into Covid-19 relief work and this also caused us to lose some of our regular funding partners. We lost many individual donors as well. Our regular funders such as Brinell, Odhani, and PVR could not continue supporting us due to losses in their businesses.

As a result, we fell short of money to pay the fees for our children at Aanchal and Aman - our homes for girls and boys.

Many of our partners themselves rely on fundraisers to support us. However such events could not take place in 2020, and even if they were able to raise money, it was at a much smaller level than in earlier years. As a result, we fell short of money to pay the fees for our children at Aanchal and Aman - our homes for girls and boys. We had to request school principals to give us more time, and ultimately we were able to manage paying fees for all the children by March 2021. From two of our big funders, we received only 40-50% of our regular budgeted amount, which made the year very very tough.

We could not pay the salaries of six of our staff (an Arts and Crafts teacher, a

Funding support for Ekjut was discontinued by the primary donor, and due to this we had to vacate our space. Now we do not have a place for the 15 women whom we were supporting earlier.

Sports teacher, a Computer Literacy teacher, the Coordinator of Sadak - an outreach program for street children, an Educator, and a tutor). Jamghat tried to support their salaries for three months but we could not anymore from July 2020 onwards. Many of these individuals are still struggling as they have not been able to find new jobs.

From January 1st, 2021, funding support for Ekjut was discontinued by the primary donor, and due to this we had to vacate our space. Now we do not have a place for the 15 women whom we were supporting earlier. Apart from that, two staff members of Ekjut - a Coordinator and a Tailor - also lost their jobs as their salaries were also included in the funding support provided by that donor.

Project Jamghat is supported by the Asha St. Louis and Asha Berkeley chapters. For more information about this project and to help provide support, please visit <https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=1143>.



THE MIGRANT WORKER IN INDIA

BY: NANDLAL MASTER (ASHA FOR
EDUCATION & LOK SAMITI), SWATI
SINGH (MUHEEM) & ANJANI KUMAR
(MUHEEM)

"One of the most telling human stories to result from the COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting nationwide lockdown is that of stranded migrant workers. But theirs isn't a new story; it's taken a pandemic for urban India to take note of an issue that has remained an unseen aspect of the country's economy for much of its contemporary history."

- P Sainath, Founder of People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) and Ramon Magsaysay Award recipient

The Migrant Worker During COVID-19

The COVID-19 spread disrupted the status quo of activities in Indian states, creating chaos. With this came a need to develop mitigation strategies accordingly. A swift and strict lockdown was imposed, leaving millions of families locked indoors. Many people and health experts welcomed the lockdown decision as they understood that desperate times called for strict measures. However, most businesses and commerce, apart from those listed as essential, were brought to a halt. But, in a country like India, which is composed mainly of workforces in an unorganized sector - a halt in commerce results in widespread job-losses. As a result, the lockdown created large concerns across the rural half of the country -

most of whom found themselves without jobs almost overnight.

Indian migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic have faced multiple hardships. With factories and workplaces shut down due to the lockdown imposed in the country, millions of migrant workers had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages and uncertainty about their futures. Following this, many of them and their families went hungry.

Many migrants also died due to the lockdown, with reasons ranging from starvation, suicides, exhaustion, road and rail accidents, police brutality and denial of timely medical care.



Thousands of them then began walking back home, with no means of transport due to the lockdown. In response, the Central and State governments took various measures to help them and later arranged transport for them.

Many migrants also died due to the lockdown, with reasons ranging from starvation, suicides, exhaustion, road and rail accidents, police brutality and denial of timely medical care.

Status of the Migrant Worker

For the marginalized working classes, it was a dual pandemic. These populations, especially the migrant worker population, lost their livelihoods.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, every section of society was affected. For the marginalized working classes, it was a dual pandemic. These populations, especially the migrant worker population, lost their livelihoods. More recently, the Government has started planning to provide employment opportunities to migrant workers. However, it is important to determine how many of these migrant workers have proper documents (like a MNREGA card, a Ration Card and/or registration in the Labor Department), and to learn what their skill sets are, since without proper registrations and documents, they will not be able to avail of the Government programs.

To understand the status of the migrant worker, Asha Trust and Sajha Sanskriti Manch organised a survey, in which Lok Samiti has participated. This study worked to collect data on migrant workers from the villages of Arajiline and Sewapuri block in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India. Lok Samiti has collected data from 1,394 migrant workers for this survey. Some of their findings are summarized below:

Ration Card Holders:

- Yes - 649 (46.6%) | No - 745 (53.4%)

Registration in Labour Department:

- Yes - 24 (1.7%) | No - 1,362 (97.7%)

Registration in MNREGA:

- Yes - 69 (4.9%) | No - 1,320 (94.7%)

Kind of Expertise:

- Unskilled Labour - 254 (18.2%)
- Skilled Labour - 1,087 (78%)
- Technician - 28 (2%)
- Don't Know - 24 (1.7%)

Will You Return to the City?

- Yes - 709 (50.9%)
- No - 673 (48.3%)
- Don't Know - 12 (0.9%)

Here we present the ten major states from which most of the migrant workers have returned:

- Gujarat
- Maharashtra
- Uttar Pradesh
- Delhi
- West Bengal
- Haryana
- Tamil Nadu
- Karnataka
- Punjab
- Andhra Pradesh



Recommendations

On the basis of above findings, here were some of our recommendations:

1. Ration cards should be made available to all migrant workers.
2. Free and sufficient food should be provided to migrant families through March 2021.
3. Through organising registration camps, labour registration cards should be provided and other registrations should be completed.
4. The MNREGA job cards for migrant workers should be made available through registration camps. They should be provided with the security of 200 working days with 600 INR wages.
5. Migrants should get jobs on the basis of their skills.
6. Safety kits should be provided to the workers during COVID-19.
7. Arrangements of allowance should be made for migrant workers until they gain employment.
8. Under the scheme of Ayushman Bharat, health cards should be issued to migrant families, through which they can get free treatment.
9. Financial literacy help should be provided to labour to help them plan their finances.
10. Migrants should get at least 10,000 INR as compensation for the difficulties they have faced during the lockdowns.

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT: AAVISHKAAR

AAVISHKAAR

Supported by the Asha Purdue chapter

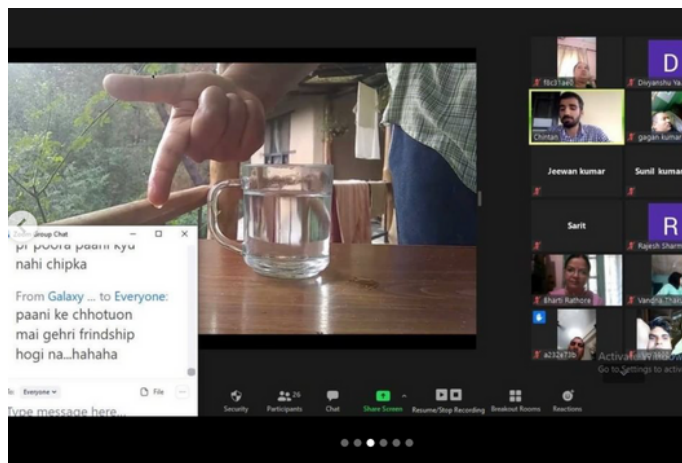
Location: Palampur (HP, India)

Project type: Conducts math and science workshops for students and educators

Overview

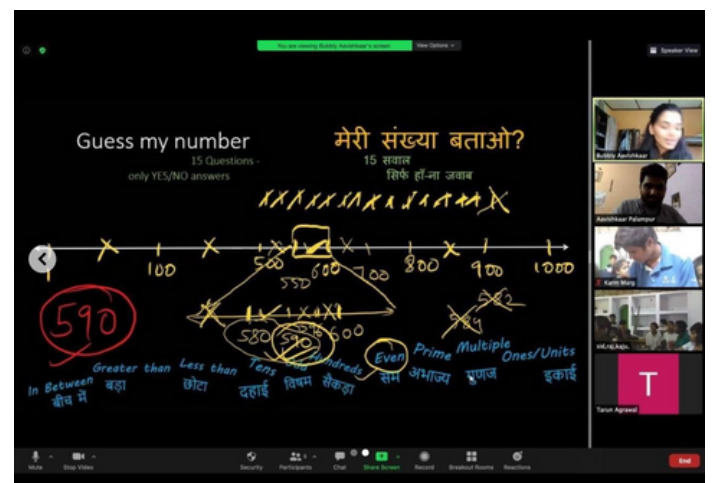
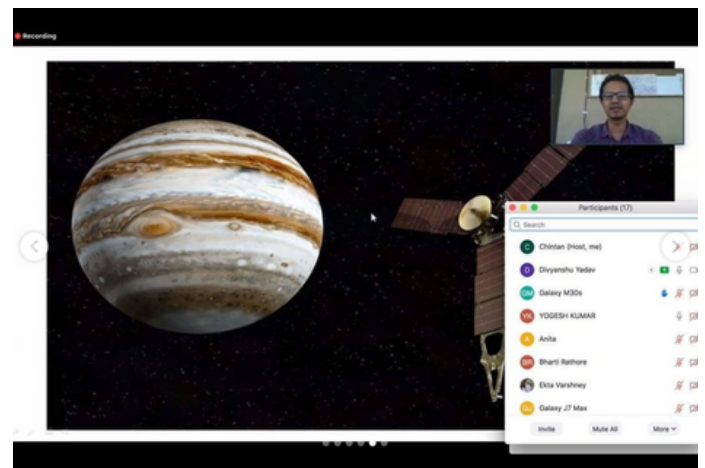
Aavishkaar aims to empower women of the Musahar community through education and by nurturing a sense of excitement and curiosity amongst school-aged children through hands-on experiences and experiments.

Aavishkaar creates custom made hands-on modules to help deliver simple math and science concepts in local languages.



Adapting to COVID-19

- Aavishkaar partnered with 10 non-profit organizations from six different states to provide online classes to over 500 students
- Aavishkaar has modified their school content for remote instruction and is currently providing 30 hours of online sessions a week over WhatsApp to more than 300 students



For more information about project Aavishkaar, please visit <https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=1255>

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT: ASHA MUMBAI

ASHA MUMBAI

Supported by the Asha Mumbai chapter

Location: Mumbai (Maharashtra, India)

Project type: Providing alternative learning and teaching materials during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Overview

The mission of Asha Mumbai's work is to break the boundaries for students confined within the walls due to COVID-19.

All Asha Mumbai COVID-resilient educational programs are likely to expand in the coming months.



Adapting to COVID-19

- Transitioned to digital learning using desktops, smart phones, and tablets. 47 students are currently being supported.
- Set up mini-classes with social distancing, digital and book libraries.
- Arranged food supplies for students and their families.
- Encouraged student engagement through several workshops such as 3D printing, woodwork, crafts, and digital animation.



For more information about the Asha Mumbai chapter, please visit <https://mumbai.ashanet.org/>

DONOR SHARE: VISHAL ASLOT

How and when did you get introduced to Asha for Education?

I was introduced to Asha for Education in 2007. I don't remember the exact series of events that led to it, but it was through a friend who was involved in Asha for Education and was training for a marathon with them. Later, I decided to train too. I ended up running the 2008 and 2009 marathons with Asha for Education.

What got you initially interested in supporting our organization?

Once I got to know the movers-and-shakers of Asha for Education through their marathon training program in Austin, Texas, a personal relationship developed with these wonderful human beings. When you train for a marathon, you end up spending a lot of time with fellow runners. So it was then that I learned about the various programs that the Asha Austin Chapter was supporting. Asha's mission was consistent with my life goals of helping to promote education for underprivileged kids, so I decided to stay connected with the program and the group. This is still a cause I care a lot about.

There are so many non-profit organizations out there working on many great causes. Why has Asha for Education stuck out for you as one that is important to continue supporting?

I do support other organizations such as AID, Cry, and Ekal Vidhyalay. However, because of my personal relationship with the Asha folks in Austin and the trust I have in the way that they manage programs, I am more interested in Asha for Education.

Long term, the easiest and quickest way for these kids to come out of poverty is through education.

What are your thoughts on Asha's role / work during the COVID-19 crisis?

I think it is even more vital for Asha for Education to work on helping underprivileged children, women, and families [during the crisis]. With a worldwide economic devastation, which is likely to remain so for a few years, I believe that it is the poor who feel the biggest brunt of it (due to little or no life savings and a shrinking job pool). I agree with Asha for Education wholeheartedly that the only way for these families to survive in these trying times is to receive some financial help from us. Long term, the easiest and quickest way for

these kids to come out of poverty is through education.

Did you approach 'giving' during the COVID-19 crisis any differently than you had in previous years?

I will do a little more than I have in the previous years. Also, I urge anyone looking to donate money to give Asha for Education a serious look, because the work they do is impactful and is done with the lowest expense of any other charity I know of. That means, more of your money goes to helping those who need it rather than to the

administration of the program itself.

Where do you want to see Asha go with its work?

I am supportive of the Asha for Education, Austin Chapter. They put a lot of thought in before accepting a new project. Long term, education for underprivileged children should still be a priority for Asha for Education, because I'd like to see these kids move above the poverty line and reach new heights in financial freedom through education.





COVID-19 RELIEF IN VARANASI

BY: SWATI SINGH (MUHEEM) &
NANDLAL MASTER (ASHA FOR EDUCATION
& LOK SAMITI)

The COVID-19 spread disrupted the status quo of activities in Indian states – the immediate effect created chaos among people and states and a need to develop strategies accordingly. But, in a country like India which is composed mainly of workforces in an unorganized sector, this created large concerns across the rural half of the country. A lockdown was imposed in the entire country to prevent the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Many people welcomed this decision as they understood that desperate times called for strict measures. The manufacturing for all product categories was stopped, apart from the ones listed as essential items, until further notice.

During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, relief food supplies have been delivered to the people of the most affected rural-urban slum areas, and also amongst the migrant workers, through organizations like Muheem and Lok Samiti in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Throughout the different phases of this relief work, the poor and needy families of weavers, daily wagers, landless farmers, pregnant women, specially abled and migrant workers have benefited.



This relief work was started on March 30, 2020 and was continued through May 31, 2020. Throughout the different phases of this relief work, the poor and needy families of weavers, daily wagers, landless farmers, pregnant women, specially abled and migrant workers have benefited. Most of these beneficiaries were from marginalized communities (e.g. Mushahar, Rajbhar, Nut, Harijan and Muslim communities).



Support of Public & Nonprofit Organizations

This whole relief work became successful due to the huge amount of public support. And organisations like Asha for Education , Sajha Sanskriti Manch (a collective forum of NGOs), AID, Crea, Chances For Children India & Learn For Life kept up their support from the beginning of this relief work. Apart from this, hotels like Surya Palace have also supported us through providing food supplies.



Number of Beneficiaries

This relief work has benefited:

- 112 Pregnant Women and 180 Adolescent Girls, who were provided special nutrition kits
- 3100 poor & needy families
- 9200 migrant workers





**Women's
Self-Help
Group**



**Kishori
Sewing and
Vocational**



**Washing
Powder
Center**



**Labors relief
camp**



**Asha Trust
Library**

LOOKING FORWARD: COVID-19 REHAB IN VARANASI

BY: KSHITIJ SRIVASTAVA,
ASHA RAJATALAB VOLUNTEER

Asha Rajatalab's Varanasi COVID-19 relief camp is an initiative by Nandlal Master, the Asha Rajatalab Chapter Coordinator, and his peers to help local women and adolescent girls self-sustain during the COVID-19 crisis.

To add to the hardships, girls and women were and still are denied opportunities for education and employment, owing to the erroneous prevailing notion that only men are able to fulfill the needs of the families.

The surge in cases and ensuing lockdown had a huge negative impact on the economy and the overall levels of employment among financially weak families. The pinch was especially felt by women across the Banaras states, since their husbands were mostly employed as migrant workers, laborers, hotel staff, and other low-wage jobs. Many of these women were also victims of domestic violence and abuse.

To add to the hardships, girls and women were and still are denied opportunities for education and employment, owing to the erroneous prevailing notion that only men are able to fulfill the needs of the families and are to be prioritized for education and employment. Thus, our initiative was taken to enable women and girls to become more aware of their inner potential to self-sustain not only on the basis of the finances of their families, but also by developing their own self-confidence. There was additional support provided by the state government through initiatives such as Mission Shakti for women's empowerment, and schemes that were beneficial for the laborers and their immediate families.

Boosting Family Economy Through Strength and Self-Reliance

As soon as the lockdown was imposed, there was a sudden economic crisis among householders fueled by rapid job losses. About 3,585 members, including over 1,000 women across the 70 villages of Sevapuri and Arazi Line, started forming women's self-help-groups (SHG) with the aid of Asha Trust India and Lok Samiti. Ration cards were distributed to over 4,000 families to help them sustain themselves. The women of the SHGs also came up with awareness drives to showcase the importance of hand washing, using sanitizers and wearing

masks along with the distribution of these supplies. Since last year's lockdown, the total number of self-help-groups are estimated to be 115.

Embroidering Happiness

The women started with an idea of self-employment by opening up a sewing center where every woman in the village could get employment, as well as where they could provide training to adolescent girls. The objective was to elevate their status not only in terms of economy, but also to help them develop self-confidence. They made masks, which were distributed free of cost to 12,000 people. About 12 centers have been opened and a total of 300 adolescent girls are being trained to sew and embroider. Moving beyond just masks, the girls are now sewing beautifully designed sarees.



Empowered by their successes with sarees and clothing, the women of the group then worked on spreading awareness about menstruation and hygiene along with the remedies, such

as the use of sanitary pads. Furthermore, they have also started planning to develop sanitary pads in the sewing centers.

They believe that they definitely have rights to education, employment and self-sustenance, just as their husbands do

Additionally, these women have also been made aware of their rights and they have emphasized the importance of rallying against domestic violence. They believe that they definitely have rights to self-sustenance, just as their husbands do, and at the same time any form of physical abuse should not be ignored and should be reported to the police, due to the courtesy of the state government that has launched 'Mission Shakti' to empower every woman of the state.

Upliftment During COVID-19 Crisis

The Labor Relief Camp was initiated to aid migrant laborers and their families, and was later extended to pregnant women, teenagers and handicapped people. Additionally, during the Ramadan month, special ration kits were given to the thousands

of Muslim families. Over ten thousand migrant workers were given food on the National Highway while returning to their homes. A survey of 1500 migrant laborers who had returned to the 50 villages of Araji Line and Sevapuri Block was carried out and a proposal was submitted to the state government to provide employment opportunities during the harsh period of the lockdown. About 5,000 families of the laborers were provided with ration cards to avail them the benefits of the government schemes.

Washing Away the Stains of Poverty

As we move forward in time, women are continuously advancing in every area. In the Nagepur district, women started an exemplary group to empower themselves by developing and manufacturing their own washing powder and soap. This initiative received media coverage, where they highlighted the achievements of self-reliance and economic empowerment.



The women are now making their SHGs manufacture washing powder at cheap prices. Kalavati, the chairperson of one of the SHGs, was interviewed and said that during the epidemic period, the head of each household struggled to get work while economic conditions worsened by the day. With the help of Asha Trust and Lok Samiti, a group of 15 women underwent training to make washing powder. Currently, they have started marketing these products by making their own washing powder and selling them in the local market shops. As a result, washing powders were sold to about 3,000 families belonging to 115 SHGs in 70 villages of Sevapuri blocks and Araji Lines. Due to the initial success of selling such products, there is a plan for doing mass manufacturing as well as making and selling other items such as pickles, marmalade, papad, pulses and spices.


Empowering Young Minds

During the pandemic crisis, most students in the area were not able to attend online classes either due to network issues or a lack of access to technology devices such as computers, smart TV and laptops. The students of classes X-XII were also facing extremely difficult challenges as they were in the middle of preparing for their board exams and college entrance exams. Outside of the

students of these classes, there were other young minds who were preparing for other entrance exams, for instance, SSC and civil services, along with other exams as well. The Asha Gyan Library (Asha Knowledge Center) is run by the Lok Samiti in the Nagepur district to help the young minds to prepare for such competitive exams. About 472 students are registered and since last year during COVID-19, there was a total addition of 69 new members. Additionally, 400 copies of preparatory books were distributed among the underprivileged children at no cost.



For more information about the Asha Rajatalab chapter, please visit <https://india.ashanet.org/rajatalab-chapter/>



SCHOOL CLOSURES & ASHA CHENNAI'S RESPONSE

BY: RAJARAMAN KRISHNAN,
ASHA CHENNAI CHAPTER COORDINATOR

Rajaraman Krishnan, a long-time Asha volunteer and the Asha Chennai Chapter Coordinator, shares with us his perspectives on the impact the COVID-19 crisis and lockdowns have had on the state of education in India. He also shares with us the Asha Chennai chapter's response to address the challenges faced.

Asha Chennai has been supporting over 100 government schools, mostly primary and middle schools. All these schools were closed down by the middle of March 2020. They are yet to open as of February 2021 and there is no clear idea when they may even open. Education everywhere has been severely affected.

Was This Pain Really Necessary?

Research has found that [younger children are less susceptible to getting infected by Covid-19](#). Further, even if they are infected, they are less likely to become ill enough to require hospitalisation. Research has also found that the [opening of schools has not caused any major outbreaks!](#)

Further, primary schools and even

middle schools in India tend to be very small and local. Only children from one Panchayat or locality go to these schools. Therefore, opening them will not expand the social circle of the children who attend these schools in any significant manner and thus will not create much of an opportunity for an outbreak.

We have as a society confused education with the *certification process* of those who are educated.

The government teachers are not being engaged for any work related to their students' education. Even with the school closures, they could have been engaged to reach education to the school children through worksheets, frequent contact over phone, WhatsApp, etc. None of this has happened. Instead, education has just been abandoned.

The focus of the education departments in most states has been on how to revive the classes for the 10th and 12th standard students as they need to appear for their board exams. We have as a society confused education with the certification process of those who are educated. Education is about learning and it is, at a fundamental level, essential for society. The certification process of board exams and degrees are a related

process to apportion the resources of the society and is, at best, a necessary evil.

Many of the things younger children learn such as fine/gross motor skills, language skills etc. are much more difficult to acquire when the children are older. Studies have found that younger children also forget much more of what they learn over a break than older children. Therefore, it ought to have been the focus of governments to revive the primary and middle schools, which is also much easier from a pandemic control point of view. But this has not been done.

What Are The Consequences?

[Pratham's ASER survey](#) provides details of the impact to education by the school closures. Technology-driven education with video conferencing and online assignment sharing is reaching only 20% of the school going children!

Even in a normal school year, children forget about 30% of what they've learned in the previous academic year during the summer holidays.

Additionally, in my personal interactions with the children who are receiving that education, I've seen that many are facing lots of difficulties. With just 1.5 hours of instruction provided in a typical day, a bad network connection and the challenges imposed by the medium itself, these students find it very difficult to understand what the teachers are teaching.

Even in a normal school year, children forget about 30% of what they've learned in the previous academic year during the summer holidays. The current break in education has already been 11 months long, with no end in sight. This is a disruption to education of devastating proportions.

While this is a problem for all children in India, it particularly affects the poor and increases the already vast disparity that exists between the poor and the privileged. Educated parents will find ways to continue engaging their children in ways that stimulate the child's mind. Further, the elite schools are finding ways to engage their students through online classes, assignments, and a wide variety of online content. These are non-starters for the underprivileged as they do not even have access to a smartphone or computer.

One of the benign consequences of compulsory free education for children was that many of the social evils like child labour and child marriages were

prevented. With the current school shutdowns, we have been observing in many of the areas in which we are working that these evils are once again on the rise. As the children are no longer engaged at school, they are being engaged in informal labour elsewhere. Children are once again working with their parents in household industries like matchbox making. They are working in the neighbourhood mechanic shops and provision shops. Girls are being engaged in household chores and in taking care of the younger ones in the family. Girls as young as 13 are being married off.

Asha Chennai's Response To These Problems

These problems were not unanticipated nor did they come as a surprise to us. From June 2020 onwards, we started our initiative of running mini-schools, and from July 2020 we have been creating a hybrid curriculum which can be used in schools with minimal contact with the students.

Many of our teachers come from the villages that we serve or other villages that are similar in profile. These villages are fairly unaffected by the coronavirus pandemic. The children in these villages were anyway playing with other children and moving about their villages.

We felt that we could start small local schools in these villages. The idea was that these children could come to the school for a little while and the teacher would give them some activities to do during the class or as homework. This would enable teachers to handle multiple batches each day and thus keep the class sizes small.

There were several challenges initially as we began this initiative. As the government had clearly ordered that the schools remain closed, the head-mistresses were afraid to allow their schools to be used for our mini-schools. These mini-schools could not function without the full support from the local community. They needed to send the children and allow the teachers to get together with the children which, despite the precautions taken, would bring the risk of transmitting the dreaded virus. In many cases, the teachers' houses were not big enough to bring all children together and conduct the classes, and so the classes had to be conducted in some public spaces nearby like a temple or a church or a partially constructed panchayat building. Here are a few photos of schools being held in public places.



After the initial fears receded, we began increasing the number of mini-schools and now all of our teachers are running one or even two mini-schools. About 65 mini-schools are running a total of nearly 90 batches of students. The schools are running in various areas, as follows:

Project	Districts	Number of mini-schools	No of batches	No. of students
Sangamam	Thiruvallur	36	49	1116
Thulasi	Villipuram and Thiruvannamalai	11	15	310
Pearl	Thoothukudi and Thirunelveli	11	16	365
Poorna Vidhya	Chennai and Kanchipuram	5	6	77
Manigal	Chennai	1	1	20
TOTAL		64	87	1888

Safety and Hygiene

While the children's education is important, safety is paramount in the present circumstances. We decided to follow these ground rules:

1. We keep the number of students in each mini-school at a level where social distancing is possible. In bigger spaces, we have as many as 20 children being managed by a single teacher.



2. Children should wash their hands and feet with soap and water before coming in.

3. The space should be open enough to allow adequate airflow and not be congested.

4. We provide a mask to each child and also ask their parents to provide additional masks, so that the children have a reasonable number of these for use. The children should be made to wear these masks to the extent possible, and the teachers should wear masks as well.

Curriculum

Once we identified a number of villages where the community welcomed our initiative, we needed to develop a curriculum that these schools could follow. Our primary focus was to build conceptual clarity in the children. With the schools still remaining closed after several months, we also began to teach the content of the textbooks.

Since the teachers have less time with the children and the children range widely in age, we developed a series of activities and worksheets that could be used to teach all children. Classroom activities like playing Math or English games, staging a drama, conducting a science experiment etc. help the children learn and understand concepts. Worksheets are given to the children during the class and as homework. This was also interspersed with games and craft activities that would be of interest to the children.



The teachers also were provided various teaching materials such as base-10 blocks, Ganitmala, children's books etc. from regular schools that we had been supporting over the years, and they have been using these at the mini-schools. They have been making their own teaching-learning materials as well to help engage the children in their learning process. Teachers also use the content on their laptops to teach.



Functions at Our Mini-Schools

Schools are important for reasons that go far beyond just academics. Children learn to socialise and work together

It is very heartening that the parents of the children and the community at large have supported these celebrations.

as a group in a school. Functions and celebrations are a very important part of this learning. Our mini-schools have also managed to celebrate Independence day, Deepavali, Christmas, Pongal etc. through small functions. It is very heartening that the parents of the children and the community at large have supported these celebrations. The food during these functions, as well as costumes and prizes have been sponsored by the community. Here are some photos of our mini-schools celebrating various functions.



Hybrid Curriculum

While our mini-schools are serving a vital need for all the children coming to them, we are only able to cover fewer than 1,800 students through these. Out of these, only about 1,000 are children going to Asha-supported schools. Prior to the pandemic, we were supporting some 6,000+ children spread across 100 schools. The rest of the children that we had been supporting prior to the pandemic were, unfortunately, not getting much in terms of education. To address this, we created a hybrid curriculum.

The government had asked the teachers to come back to the schools in small numbers but had not allowed the schools to be open to children. We had to work within the restrictions imposed by the government. We honed in on the following things:

- Distribute worksheets to the students.
- Meet and teach children in person as much as possible.
- Form a Whatsapp group of the children. Send them materials like videos and online games to do every day.
- Align these to what is happening in the Kalvi TV channel.
- Talk to the children and the parents of the children on a regular basis to ensure that the children are continuing to spend the time on their education.



Towards this end, Asha had created a set of modules for each lesson for each class/subject from the 3rd to the 8th standards. There will be about 4 to 6 modules for each lesson corresponding to the number of weeks over which a lesson is typically covered. These modules will contain the following:

- Reference to the pages in the textbook for this module.
- Link to one or more videos to watch.
- Link to a game or something fun related to this module, if possible.
- One or more worksheets. These can also be separately printed out.

While this has been used at some schools, it has not yet been actively used by many schools. There haven't been any incentives for the government teachers to find alternative ways to engage the students and, if anything, there is a constant threat of punishment if they do something that brings the children together. We hope the schools open soon and will do the best that we can to revive the children's education.

For more information about the Asha Chennai chapter, please visit <https://chennai.ashanet.org/>



COVID-19 LOCKDOWN OF SCHOOLS: THE IMPACT AND THE FUTURE

BY: MELLI ANNAMALAI,
VETERAN ASHA VOLUNTEER

Melli Annamalai is a veteran Asha volunteer. Over the years she has worked with numerous project partners across India, traveling to many rural corners and impoverished urban areas. Her current focus is on projects in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu that work with rural government schools, and also education centers that empower youth groups to help their communities. Melli is passionate about equitable access to quality education.

We also have gained an interesting insight at an unexpected time - has the pandemic revealed a path to education reform?

Much has been written about the impact of COVID-19 on education. Many lives have been impacted, many dreams have been lost. Here we share a grassroots perspective of what this has meant for disadvantaged and vulnerable communities in India, and for the children, youth, and girls. Our project partners have pursued creative ideas to keep a modicum of school-based learning continuously available. We also have gained an interesting insight at an unexpected time - has the pandemic revealed a path to education reform?

The Harsh impact

All children, regardless of socio-economic background, were affected by the abrupt shutdown of schools caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A couple of hours of online classes where children had to be hunched over smartphones were hardly a substitute for a classroom.

As schools transitioned to online learning, gaps between the rich and the poor and between urban and rural areas began to surface.

But soon it was clear that the impact was more severe on children from disadvantaged backgrounds. As schools transitioned to online learning, gaps between the rich and the poor and between urban and rural areas began to surface. In poor urban households with only a single smartphone per family, parents took the phones with them when they went to work, so there was no phone for students to use. In rural areas, only 30% of households had access to smartphones. In remote areas such as in forested tribal areas, Internet connectivity was non-existent.

Learning came to a virtual standstill for all of these students.

Other divisions soon showed up. Boys were given preference over girls to use the family phone and the precious data plan, and boys' classes took precedence over those of the girls in the family. Girls poring over a smartphone did not sound like education to parents and relatives; comments such as "She is sitting with that contraption in her ears every day for 2-3 hours when she should be doing household chores and getting ready for marriage" were used as reasons to not provide girls with the phones.

Families with children in Asha-supported activities make a tenuous living as agricultural laborers, vegetable vendors, household help, street side vendors, hand cart pullers, and so on. Their precarious livelihoods were severely affected, so families began to look at marriage as a safe haven for girls. Youngsters began working outside the home to help support the family, finding work where they could as laborers in the fields, workers in agarbathi factories, dishwashers in hotels. All of this further degraded the ability of these

Were we about to lose the hard fought gains of the last few decades?

children to learn online, even if they had access to a device. In addition, parents' unemployment led to anger, frustration, domestic abuse and fraught situations at home, none of these conducive to learning.

Were we about to lose the hard fought gains of the last few decades?

Particularly Disheartening

If this was not enough, we've also seen that with increased privatization, education has become a business. The lockdown threw into sharp relief what this really means. Schools' main focus is keeping the students (and their fees) on their rolls. They conducted namesake online classes, all the time focused on the fees coming in. So much so that free textbooks issued by the government were withheld until students paid a percentage of their fees to the school. Education officials are not much better. They are only interested in placating initiatives such as, "Everyone will pass regardless of whether they attend school or not." The purpose of education is seen as getting a certificate, not the learning the certificate is supposed to signify.

The Bright Spots

True to their grit and resilience, Asha projects explored and implemented a

range of innovative ideas to keep some sort of schooling going.

Teachers' Education

The lockdown offered an opportunity to improve teachers' skills. Several discussions and seminars were organized for teachers over WhatsApp. As people adapted to video conferencing, many new options opened up. A 52-week series of lectures on education linked teachers in remote schools to experts across the country and the world, leveraging a bright spot of the pandemic world – virtual communication.

In a slum area, books were distributed to children weekly by volunteers, becoming a mobile library on foot.

Innovation

As the strict lockdown eased, some rural teachers created 'Community Learning Centers' in open, public spaces in their villages, on rooftops, or in the courtyards of their own homes. In another innovative initiative, books were placed in children's homes in rural areas, each "mini-library" serving 60-70 homes. Children were the librarians, much to their excitement. In a slum area, books were distributed to children weekly by volunteers, becoming a mobile library on foot.



Doing their Best

A school serving village children in Karnataka set up meticulous plans for online learning. They gathered phone numbers of any person – either a family member or a neighbor or a relative – who could provide a smartphone during class time. Physical worksheets were prepared for offline material, and parents were asked to come in once a week for social distanced pickups. Links to relevant videos were sent for offline viewing. During online sessions on WhatsApp, concepts were discussed and questions answered.



Being a Girl and Learning

Projects with a focus on girls' education leveraged the trust they had

built with the communities over the years to have intensive conversations with the girls' families. A center in Ahmedabad focused on explaining to family members that their daughters were actually learning with the 'contraption' (i.e. the phone), and that it was more important than ever to be armed with education and skills for a job in the future. With Asha's approval, they reallocated existing funds to buy tablets and an Internet subscription for a year for every girl. A youth center in Madurai focused on activities they could do outdoors – arts and drama events, a 10-lecture series by women role models via Zoom to mark the 10-day Dasara festival, and in one innovative plan, two-wheeler driving lessons for girls (as we have seen often, female empowerment is linked to mobility).

As schools slowly reopen, we are prepared to address the inevitable gaps in learning that we will see because of this lost year.

A Glimmer of Hope

The COVID-19 pandemic locked down schools, but it could not lock down minds.

We were in for a surprising revelation.

The COVID-19 pandemic locked down schools, but it could not lock down minds. Freed from the rigid curriculum-based teaching, the time away from formal schooling gave children, youth, and teachers the opportunity to pursue various avenues of interest, leading to many fascinating outcomes.

At a girls' school in Uttar Pradesh, teachers noticed that students began to look up information on their own. Instead of being passive recipients in a classroom, they referred to dictionaries and books when they had a question, or wanted to learn about something.

Youth working on Science education for rural government schools designed their own telescope at 1/10th the cost of buying one, creating great excitement among rural government schools when students and teachers conveyed that they could see the moons of Jupiter and the rings of Saturn. Teachers marveled at the fact that even someone in a remote village could build a telescope.



At a children's home, a young boy created a toy boat from the spare parts of a car, all on his own. Others created their own plays and [videos of songs](#).



Teachers from a tribal school worked with curriculum material differently. In one outdoor project, their students observed the weather, read electric meters, and correlated weather with electricity usage. They gathered data from households in their villages and observed trends, which enabled them observational and data-oriented learning to which they had not been exposed before.

This leads to an interesting insight. Instead of trying to train teachers and school management to move away from rote memorization to experiential learning, a simpler answer might be before us. Perhaps we should just give the students and teachers more freedom on how they want to learn. Guidance is good, but what if we were to also give them more independence? This might be the fastest path to education reform. In a digitally connected world where so much information is available at our fingertips, is the standard way of learning from one textbook in a classroom the best option? The pandemic revealed to us a surprising insight. What will we as a society learn and take-away from this?

PROJECTS SPOTLIGHT: MANASA & SIKSHANA

MANASA

*Supported by the Asha Purdue chapter
Location: Hyderabad (TG, India)
Project type: Education for children
with special needs*

Overview

Manasa provides special education and comprehensive health & rehabilitation services to children with disabilities living in vulnerable conditions and support to their families.

Adapting to COVID-19

- Trained staff to use technology and empowered them to come up with custom solutions to fit individual family needs.
- Taught parents to conduct WhatsApp therapy sessions with online instructions



*For more information about project
Manasa, please visit*
<https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=1130>

SIKSHANA

*Supported by the Asha Seattle chapter
Location: Bangalore (Karnataka, India)
Project type: Working with the
government in Karnataka*

Overview

Sikshana is all about improving the quality of education in the state-run schools to provide an opportunity for children from the lower strata of society to raise their living standards.

Adapting to COVID-19

- Math and English workbooks, sanitation kits, and masks are being delivered to students or picked up by parents.
- Students will work on WASH (Water Sanitation and Hygiene) projects to learn more about keeping their community safe during COVID and from other communicable & non-communicable diseases.
- Over 3800 children of migrant laborers supported.



*For more information about project
Sikshana, please visit*
<https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=397>

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT: ASHA DARSHAN TRUST

ASHA DARSHAN TRUST

Supported by the Asha Silicon Valley chapter

Location: Tamulpur (Assam, India)

Project type: Community-based interventions in rural Assam

Overview

The primary objective is to promote education in a poverty-ridden and militancy prone area by supporting community workers & teachers and providing resources essential to run primary, pre-primary schools and vocational training centers.



Adapting to COVID-19

The primary objective is to promote education in a poverty-ridden and militancy prone area by supporting community workers & teachers and providing resources essential to run primary, pre-primary schools and vocational training centers.

The project has divided the 800+ kids into two categories & implemented targeted strategies to each group:

- 1: Those with good home conditions: The teacher visits the home and teaches the kids in clusters of 5-8 depending on the proximity of houses every few days.
- 2: Those who do not have a proper home environment or nearby facility for learning: The students come to the schools and are being taught there. They are able to implement social distancing and other guidelines in each school.



For more information about project Asha Darshan Trust, please visit <https://ashanet.org/project/?pid=284>