

# SMALL STEPS TO BUILD GREAT SCHOOLS

Volume III  
Stories from the Shikshagraha Awards 2026





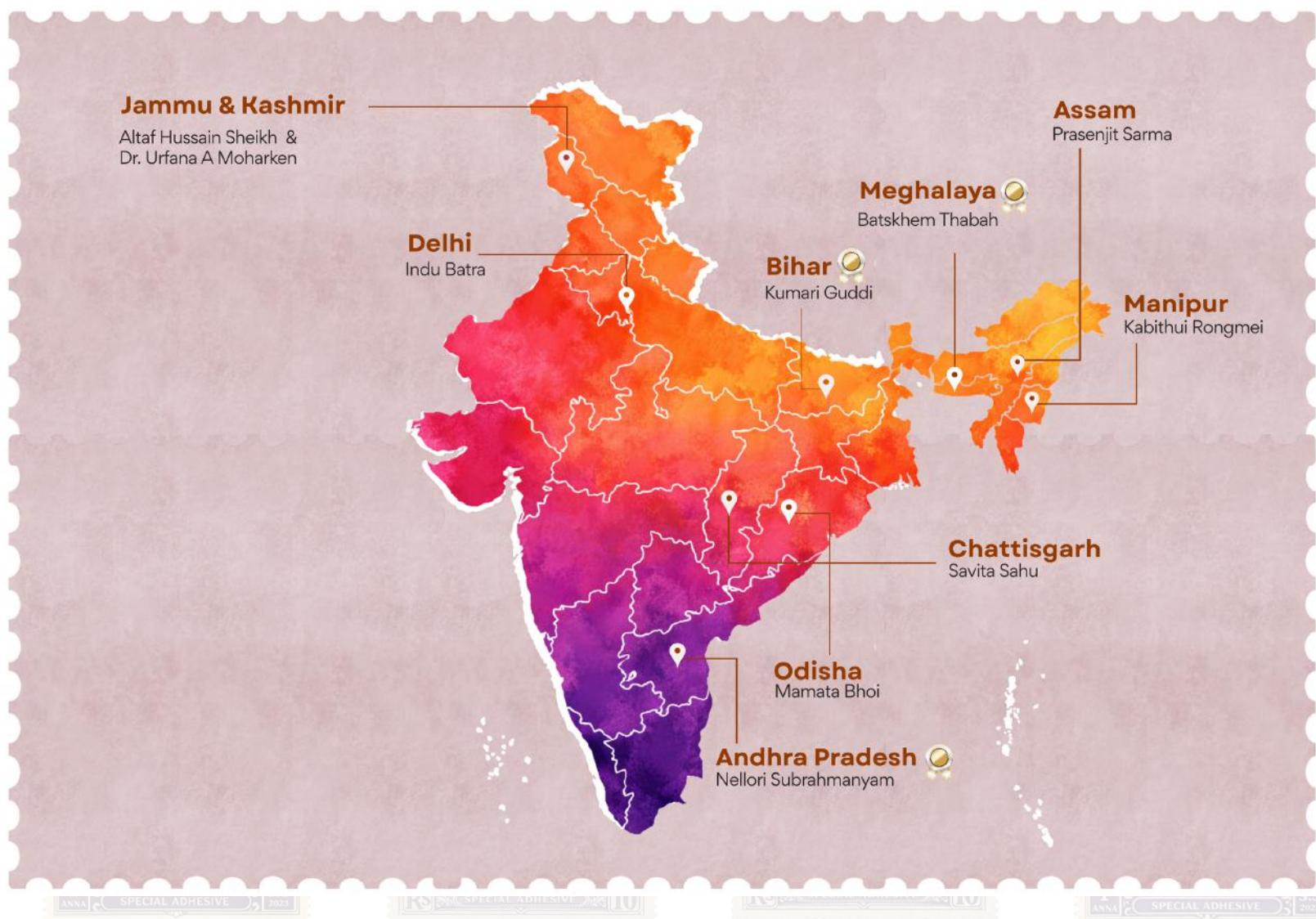
# Small Steps to Build Great Schools

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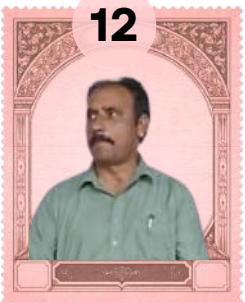
# Mapping Education Leadership Excellence

Celebrating education leaders from across India—each pin represents a nominee or awardee transforming public education in their community.



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# Foreword

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When we conceived the Shikshagraha Awards, we were guided by a fundamental conviction: that exceptional leadership in education deserves recognition, celebration, and amplification. Across India's vast educational landscape, countless school leaders work with quiet determination to transform the lives of children entrusted to their care. Yet their contributions often go unacknowledged, their innovations are not visible, and their dedication unheralded.

The Shikshagraha Awards were instituted to change this—to shine a light on these exemplary leaders and to create a platform where their work can inspire others to imagine what is possible within their own spheres of influence.

The evidence is unequivocal: leadership matters profoundly in education. Research consistently demonstrates that effective school leadership is second only to quality teaching in its impact on student learning outcomes. School leaders shape the culture of their institutions, set the tone for pedagogical excellence, and create the conditions under which both teachers and students can flourish. In resource-constrained environments, which characterise much of India's public education system, the role of leadership becomes even more critical. Whether it's a school leader or a teacher or a community member, their leadership helps the system navigate challenges, mobilise limited resources creatively, and sustain the collective will to pursue excellence despite obstacles.

The leaders honoured through the Shikshagraha Awards exemplify this transformative potential. What distinguishes them is not grand pronouncements or sweeping reforms, but rather their commitment to micro-improvements—small, purposeful actions taken consistently over time. They understand that sustainable change is built through incremental steps: a new approach to morning assembly that builds community, a restructured timetable that accommodates remedial support, a parent engagement initiative that strengthens trust between school and home. These seemingly modest interventions, implemented with sincerity and sustained over time, create momentum that transforms entire school ecosystems. The leaders featured in this book have demonstrated that meaningful progress does not require waiting for perfect conditions or abundant resources. It requires vision, persistence, and an unwavering focus on what serves children best.

It is particularly heartening to note the geographical diversity represented in this collection. Our awardees and nominees come from states spanning the length and breadth of our nation—from the Northeast to the South, from the western frontiers to the eastern reaches. This distribution reflects not only the reach of the Shikshagraha movement but also the universality of the challenges facing Indian education and the locally rooted solutions emerging in response. Each region brings its distinct cultural context, linguistic landscape, and socioeconomic realities; yet the fundamental commitment to children's learning and wellbeing transcends these boundaries.



Perhaps most significantly, these stories represent a shifting narrative around public education in India. For too long, public schools have been viewed primarily through the lens of their deficits—inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, poor learning outcomes. While these challenges are real and must be addressed systemically, they do not represent the complete picture. Increasingly, we are witnessing a counter-narrative emerge: one of innovation, dedication, and measurable impact within the public education system. The leaders in this book are at the forefront of this shift.

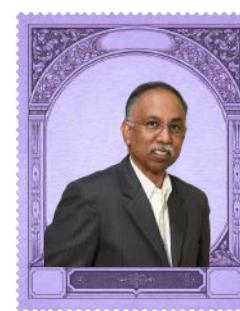
This changing narrative is not merely aspirational; it is grounded in observable reality. Across India, there is growing recognition that strengthening public education is not simply a policy imperative but a social and economic necessity. When nearly 60 percent of India's children attend government or aided schools, the quality of public education is a question of national consequence. The leaders celebrated in these pages are building the foundation for this transformation.

As we honour these exceptional individuals through the Shikshagraha Awards, we also issue a broader call to action. We must create systems that identify, support, and nurture such leadership at scale. We must ensure that the innovations pioneered by these leaders are documented, shared, and adapted across contexts. We must build networks where education leaders can learn from one another, draw strength from collective wisdom, and sustain their

commitment through the inevitable challenges they face.

The stories that follow are more than accounts of individual achievement. They are testaments to what becomes possible when leadership is exercised with clarity of purpose, depth of commitment, and genuine care for every child. They remind us that transformation in education is not the exclusive domain of policymakers and experts, but is fundamentally driven by those who lead schools day after day, with consistency and conviction.

May these stories inspire deeper appreciation for the complexity of educational leadership, greater support for those who undertake this vital work, and renewed commitment to building a public education system that prepares every child in India for the future.



**S.D. Shibulal**

*Co-founder, The Shibulal Family Philanthropic Initiatives, & Co-founder and Former CEO, Infosys Ltd.*

# Hear from the Jury



**Dr. Subramanian Rangan**

Professor of Strategy and Management, INSEAD;  
Jury Chair, Shikshagraha Awards

Learning is a lock. Engaging education is the key. And the leaders we celebrate through the Shikshagraha Awards are master locksmiths—innovators who unlock learning potential in children who might otherwise remain trapped by circumstance. What drew me to serve as Jury Chair for these awards is their recognition of a fundamental truth: leadership means enabling others. The most effective leaders are not chief executive officers but chief enabling officers. They create conditions where students, teachers, and communities can flourish. During our reviews, we also saw that these educators combined are with strategic thinking. They were not merely wishful thinkers but thoughtful problem-solvers who tackled systemic challenges. For India to reap its demographic dividend, we must enable young children to become well-adjusted, productive, engaged adults. The Shikshagraha Awards celebrate leaders making this transformation possible, one school, one community, one unlocked potential at a time.



**Anita Karwal**

Former Secretary, Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education, Government of India

Throughout my career, I have witnessed firsthand how transformative leadership at the school level fundamentally alters the trajectory of children's learning and lives. The Shikshagraha Awards represent a critical intervention in our educational ecosystem—one that recognises and celebrates the quiet, persistent work of leaders who are rebuilding trust in public education, one student, one community at a time. The Awards are significant with their focus on steady, purposeful action rather than dramatic, one-time interventions. The leaders we evaluated demonstrate that lasting impact is built through consistent effort sustained over years. They embody the principle that meaningful change in education requires collective action. They actively build partnerships with parents, community members, local government bodies, and civil society organisations to create comprehensive learning environments for children. Change begins when leaders decide to act on what they can control, and build momentum through demonstrated success.



**Kameshwari Jandhyala**

*Former Director, Mahila Samakhya, Andhra Pradesh*

For the vast majority of Indian children, particularly girls and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, government schools represent their primary route to dignity and economic mobility. When we strengthen public education through committed leadership, we strengthen the foundation of an equitable society. The Shikshagraha Awards remind us that the transformation from mere access to genuine learning is possible—demonstrated daily by leaders who refuse to give up on any child. These leaders we honour recognise that the government alone cannot bring desired change. They have mobilised partnerships—working with communities, parents, Village Education Committees, and local administrators to transform the schooling experience itself. These leaders have adopted systematic approaches: assessing actual learning levels, enabling teachers to grapple directly with children's realities, creating visual tools that communicate challenges honestly. They have worked on what makes school meaningful—joyful learning environments, culturally relevant pedagogy and genuine engagement with each child's pace and potential.



**Prof Stefan Dercon**

*Professor, Economic Policy, Blavatnik School of Government & Department of Economics, University of Oxford; former Chief Economist at the Department for International Development (DFID), UK*

As an economist who has spent decades studying why some countries escape poverty while others remain trapped, I have become convinced of one fundamental truth: education is the most powerful lever for economic inclusion we possess. India has nearly 1 million public schools serving over 120 million children. Hence, transformation at scale is not just desirable but imperative. We need leadership that can cascade change across entire districts, states, and ultimately the nation. The Shikshagraha Awards honours such leadership— one which is driving excellence within public schools. These leaders have mastered something that often eludes policymakers: sustainable change at scale does not begin with grand blueprints imposed from above. It emerges from demonstrated success at the local level that proves replicable and inspires others to act. The case for investing in such leadership is irrefutable.



**Anshu Gupta**  
Founder - Goonj and Gram  
Swabhimaan  
Ramon Magsaysay Awardee

Having spent decades working at the intersection of development and dignity, I have come to understand that real change does not arrive through top-down mandates—it emerges from the ground, led by those who refuse to accept the status quo and choose instead to act with whatever resources they have at hand. The Shikshagraha Awards celebrate precisely this kind of change leaders: educators who restore agency not just to themselves, but to entire communities. What struck me while evaluating the nominations was how these leaders embody the principle of starting where they are.

They do not wait for grand interventions or ideal circumstances. They begin with what's immediately available, taking deliberate steps that accumulate into a profound impact on the communities. This is the essence of sustainable change—not dramatic gestures, but patient, purposeful action rooted in a deep understanding of local context.



**Dr. Urvashi Sahni**  
Educationist, Social  
Entrepreneur & Women's  
Rights Advocate

Over four decades of working with underprivileged communities, I have witnessed a fundamental truth: education is the most powerful tool for breaking cycles of poverty and oppression. The Shikshagraha Awards celebrate the leaders who have demonstrated courage in challenging the deeply entrenched barriers and making education genuinely accessible and transformative. These leaders understand that meaningful education requires more than classrooms and textbooks. It demands dismantling social hierarchies, addressing gender discrimination, creating safe spaces where every child can discover their voice and potential. They work alongside parents, particularly mothers, recognising that when women are engaged as partners in education, entire communities transform. They build local ownership, develop contextually relevant approaches, and create systems that can sustain beyond their individual presence. These leaders build and nurture affirming, joyful, relevant learning environments through innovation, compassion, and relentless commitment—proving that when education genuinely empowers, it breaks cycles of oppression that have persisted for generations.

# Stories from the Shikshagraha Awards 2026

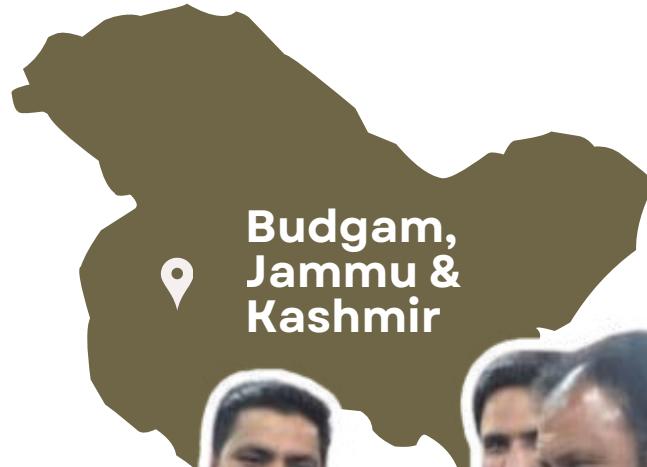


Where Health Meets Hope: Breaking TB's Grip on Education

# ALTAF HUSSAIN SHEIKH

*Community Leader, Cultural Educational and Environmental Organisation*

Over the past four years, Altaf Hussain Sheikh, 53, has led a grassroots movement that brought girls, orphans, and children from tuberculosis (TB) affected families back into classrooms through the "Back to School – School for All" campaign.



## One standout micro-improvement

Altaf mobilised an entire district through door-to-door surveys, community learning circles, and the integration of health and education support—bringing 1,200+ out-of-school children back to classrooms, including 400+ girls and 100+ children from TB-affected families.





In Budgam district, Jammu & Kashmir, a region marked by socio-political instability and economic hardship, hundreds of children were no longer enrolled in school, with their dropout untracked and hence, unquestioned. Girls stayed home due to safety concerns and household duties, while orphans had no one to ensure they received an education. Compounding these challenges, TB was a persistent public health crisis in the region—with the Kashmir valley recording a prevalence of 49.03 per 100,000 people in 2019. Children from TB-affected families faced both health challenges and educational neglect. Over time, the distance between schools and communities had grown so wide that education felt like something that happened to other people's children—not theirs.

Altaf refused to accept this reality. As a community leader deeply rooted in Budgam's villages, he understood that getting children back to school required more than government directives—it demanded trust, persistence, and community ownership. In 2020, he began a systematic campaign, going door-to-door across remote villages to identify every child outside the education system. What he discovered was both heartbreak and actionable: families wanted education for their children but faced

overwhelming barriers—poverty, health crises, gender discrimination, and a profound disconnect from schools that felt distant and unwelcoming.

Altaf didn't just identify the problem—he built the solution from the ground up. He created festive enrolment events that brought entire villages together, making school admission a cause for celebration rather than bureaucracy. He trained over 150 volunteers to run neighbourhood learning groups, helping children bridge educational gaps before returning to formal schooling. Most importantly, he recognised that health and education couldn't be separated—working to ensure that families battling TB received both medical care and educational support, preventing children from falling through the cracks of either system. He worked with village elders and clerics to shift attitudes towards girls' education, turning sceptical parents into proud participants in school activities.

Over four years, his work created bottom-up structures, such as local education task forces that put in place regular child tracking systems in collaboration with village education committees. What makes Altaf's work truly significant is his understanding that educational equity in marginalised communities cannot be imposed from above—it must be built from within, with empathy, cultural sensitivity, and unwavering commitment to education equity.

## WHY HIS MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS MATTER

### **The Educational Crisis in Budgam, Jammu & Kashmir:**

- J&K's history of socio-political instability has created prolonged disruptions to schooling, with many children experiencing years of educational gaps.
- As of 2024, 4,400 government schools across Jammu & Kashmir have been shut down due to poor enrolment, with over 1,200 additional schools identified for merger—reflecting a systemic collapse in education access.
- In 2020, when Altaf began his work, the COVID-19 pandemic had severely disrupted TB control programmes in Kashmir—lockdowns delayed diagnosis and treatment, case detection declined significantly, and families struggled with both health crises simultaneously, whilst existing challenges with multidrug-resistant TB intensified.

- Children from TB-affected families experience dual marginalisation—health challenges and education neglect—as families struggle with medical care and social stigma.
- Orphans and children from extremely vulnerable households lack advocates to ensure their enrolment and attendance.

## WHAT HE OBSERVED

Growing up and working in Budgam's villages, Altaf witnessed children dropping out from schools without anyone noticing or caring. He saw families who wanted education for their children but had no pathway to access it—schools felt bureaucratic, distant, and unwelcoming. He recognised that girls were disproportionately kept home due to safety fears and household expectations. He observed children from TB-affected families facing both medical and educational abandonment, with no one understanding or bridging the gap between health services and schools. He understood that without trusted community leadership to rebuild the connection between families and education, entire generations in already severely-conflict-affected regions would remain locked out of learning opportunities.



## MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS INITIATED BY HIM

- Integrated health and education through "TB-Free Budgam" initiative, ensuring children from TB-affected households received medical support and academic follow-up.
- Conducted extensive door-to-door surveys across remote villages to identify every out-of-school child, including girls, orphans, and children from TB-affected families.
- Engaged diverse stakeholders—village elders, clerics, ASHA workers, and youth—to collectively address barriers to schooling and break stigma around TB.
- Launched "Back to School – School for All" campaign mobilising teachers, Panchayati Raj Institutions, health workers, religious leaders, and community volunteers.
- Organised "School Enrolment Melas" in remote areas, transforming enrolment into community celebrations with cultural programs.
- Facilitated community awareness sessions and parent-teacher meetings to address barriers and shift attitudes toward education, especially for girls.
- Established community learning circles providing remedial education for children with learning gaps, supported by over 150 trained volunteers.
- Advocated with district authorities for school infrastructure improvements and institutionalised child tracking systems.
- Facilitated creation of learning corners in homes for children unable to immediately return to formal schooling.
- Built bottom-up, people-led structures including local education task forces that function independently and sustainably.



# IMPACT

- **Out-of-school children mainstreamed:** 1,200+ children brought back to school, including 400+ girls and 100+ children from TB-affected households who had been educationally abandoned.
- **Enrolment increase:** 25% rise in school enrolment across several Panchayat Halqas (groups of villages) of Budgam, with marked improvement in girls' attendance and retention.
- **Health-education integration:** Every child from TB-affected families identified, medically supported, and enrolled in school with continuous academic monitoring through TB-Free Budgam initiative.
- **Learning outcomes:** Significant improvement in children participating in remedial groups, with teachers reporting better classroom engagement due to regular community support.
- **Community mobilisation:** 150+ community volunteers trained and actively assisting with learning support, enrolment drives, and student tracking.
- **Cultural shift:** Parents who initially resisted education now proudly participate in school activities; families view education as a pathway to dignity and opportunity rather than a distant obligation.



- **Systemic change:** Local education officers institutionalised regular child tracking systems in collaboration with village education committees, creating sustainable accountability structures.
- **Gender equity:** Increased enrolment and attendance of girls through targeted engagement with families and religious leaders, shifting deeply entrenched norms.
- **Sustainable structures:** Bottom-up community learning circles and local education task forces continue functioning independently, ensuring lasting impact beyond individual leadership.

## A VOICE OF BELIEF

“

**Altaf Qureshi**  
CEO, CEEO India

*"What makes Altaf's work exceptional is how he transformed educational access in one of India's most challenging contexts—not through top-down mandates, but through trust and relentless community engagement. He built bridges between families and schools that no government programme alone could create, addressing health crises, shifting gender norms, and breaking stigma around TB. By mobilising village elders, clerics, health workers, and volunteers, he created an entire ecosystem of care around education. His work proves that when communities own education, even the most marginalised children reclaim their right to learn."*

Where the Village Becomes the Classroom

# BATSKHEM THABAH<sup>®</sup>

Teacher, Raibah Government Lower Primary School



Since 2021, Batskhem Thabah, 33, has transformed a collapsing school into a thriving community hub through the innovative Raibah Living Library—a space where indigenous knowledge, environmental stewardship, and academic learning converge. His community-embedded approach has re-centred indigenous knowledge within everyday schooling, reconnecting children to their land, language, and learning.

**South West Khasi Hills,  
Meghalaya**



## One standout micro-improvement

Batskhem created the Raibah Living Library, transforming education into a shared village experience where students and adults learn together—from reading and storytelling to beekeeping and coffee cultivation.





In Raibah village, education doesn't stop at the school gate—it spills into the forests, flows through coffee plantations, and hums in beehives. At the heart of this transformation is the Raibah Living Library, an innovation that has redefined what learning can be. When Batskhem arrived at Raibah Government Lower Primary School in 2021, he found a building on the verge of collapse: leaking roof, cracked walls, broken windows, and barely any students.

After two years of COVID closures, children had lost connection with school, parents had disengaged, and the community saw no reason to invest in an institution that seemed to be dying. Batskhem could have requested a transfer. Instead, he stayed and reimagined everything.

He enlisted students' support to clean the compound and plant flowers, crafted teaching aids from bamboo and areca leaves, and launched a crowdfunding campaign that rallied the entire village to repair the roof and build bamboo fencing. But his most profound innovation was the Living Library—a space where children don't just read books but learn from village elders about indigenous plants,

conservation practices, beekeeping, and sustainable livelihoods. Here, a grandmother teaches traditional weaving while a child reads aloud. A farmer demonstrates coffee cultivation while students document the process. Education becomes a bridge between generations, a celebration of local wisdom, and a pathway to economic dignity. In Batskhem's hands, the village itself becomes the most powerful classroom.

## WHY HIS MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS MATTER

### Schools at the Edge of Survival:

- Rural schools in Meghalaya face severe infrastructure neglect, with many buildings unsafe during the region's prolonged monsoon seasons.
- Post-pandemic, attendance and enrolment plummeted as communities lost faith in schools that couldn't provide even basic facilities or engaging learning environments.
- Indigenous knowledge systems and traditional livelihoods are rapidly

disappearing as younger generations disconnect from cultural practices and environmental stewardship.

- Rural teachers often struggle with multi-grade classrooms, limited resources, and minimal community support, leading to high student transfer requests and low retention.
- Economic vulnerability in remote villages limits educational aspirations, with families seeing little connection between schooling and sustainable livelihoods.

## WHAT HE OBSERVED

A school that had become physically dangerous and socially irrelevant. Children showed low motivation and poor attendance. There were no textbooks, teaching aids, or creative outlets. Talented and artistic students had nowhere to express themselves. The school-community relationship was broken, with parents viewing education as disconnected from their lives and livelihoods. Indigenous knowledge—about medicinal plants, traditional farming, conservation—was vanishing as elders aged and youth migrated. The school wasn't just underperforming; it had become an inactive, forgotten space.



## MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS INITIATED BY HIM

- Mobilised community to convert unused Anganwadi building into functional classroom space.
- Introduced team games, music, drama, and interactive literacy activities to make learning joyful.
- Partnered with "Owl Library" to establish a vibrant reading culture with books and storytelling sessions.
- Implemented multi-grade teaching strategies with support from the Directorate of Educational Research and Training (DERT).
- Collaborated with "Greenhub" to integrate beekeeping and coffee cultivation training for income generation.
- Designed personalised activities for dropouts and students with special needs.



## IMPACT

- **School enrolment:** Enrolment tripled as families gained confidence in improved teaching quality and school environment.
- **Attendance and participation:** Regular attendance and confident classroom participation increased through joyful, child-centred engagement.
- **Community ownership:** The entire village became active partners in education—volunteering skills, mentoring children, and celebrating achievements.
- **Learning recovery:** Dropped-out students reconnected with education through hands-on mentorship and experiential learning.
- **Creative confidence:** Artistic expression strengthened through painting, storytelling, drama, and music, building voice and self-belief.
- **Cultural continuity:** Indigenous knowledge preserved through documentation and intergenerational transmission.
- **Mindset shift:** A visible change in aspirations, with students dreaming bigger and communities taking collective pride in public education.

## A VOICE OF BELIEF

“

### Yendrembam Binand Singh

*Former Lead Programs, Teachers Education Department  
Mantra4Change (CSO Partner)*

"What makes Batskhem's work truly extraordinary is how he dissolved the boundary between school and community. The Raibah Living Library isn't just an educational innovation—it's a cultural reclamation project. He understood that for education to matter in Raibah, it had to honor what the village already knew, while opening doors to what it could become. By inviting elders to teach alongside [learning from] books, by turning beekeeping into mathematics and coffee cultivation into ecology lessons, he created a model where learning feels like belonging. His deep personal investment—living among the people, visiting homes, celebrating harvests—transformed education from an external imposition into a shared village treasure."



Rebuilding Hope, One Child at a Time

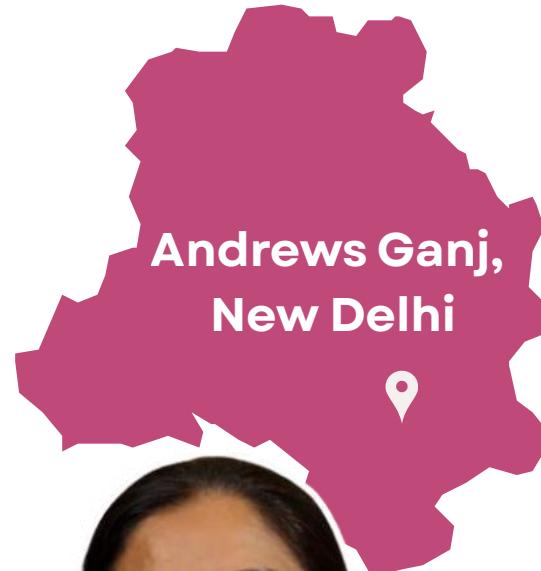
# INDU BATRA

Headmaster, MC Primary School

Since 2020, Indu Batra, 58, has transformed a government school struggling with low enrolment, severe learning gaps and limited resources in the pandemic's aftermath into a thriving learning community.

## One standout micro-improvement

Through 15+ strategic partnerships with civil society organisations and relentless community engagement, Indu Batra rebuilt learning and hope for over 1,750 students after the COVID-19 pandemic.





In 2020, when India was grappling with social distancing, COVID mortality, and mask compliance, schools were fighting a quieter crisis: how to continue educating children. The most severe consequence of the pandemic was not just disruption, but the deep learning gaps it created—gaps the system is still working to close.

According to ASER 2022, children's basic reading ability dropped to pre-2012 levels, reversing the slow improvement achieved in the intervening years.

When children returned to Andrews Ganj School in 2022 after nearly two years away, they carried the weight of that absence. More than 85% could not read at grade level. Grade 4 students struggled with Grade 2 Mathematics. Many had forgotten how to raise their hands, work in groups, or follow basic classroom routines. For children from migrant families from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, the learning loss felt even more overwhelming—their families lacked the resources and literacy levels to support home-based learning, and many had experienced disrupted schooling due to migration.

The school building also reflected this reality. The school infrastructure had fallen into

disrepair due to neglect: furniture broken, classrooms damaged, and no boundary wall to ensure safety. Indu, who had taken over as Principal just before the pandemic in 2020, faced a defining choice: rebuild what existed, or reimagine what the school could become. She chose an overhaul.

Over the next three years, she forged partnerships with more than 15 organisations with expertise in—reading programmes, Maths interventions, special-needs support, and infrastructure upgrades. She redesigned daily school routines to help children reconnect with learning: morning assemblies, peer circles, and well-being check-ins. She turned anxious parents into allies as library volunteers and event organisers.

Rather than treating assessment results as judgments, she turned them into action plans. She introduced yearly planning meetings where teachers and partner organisations analysed student results together, identified specific learning gaps and set clear, measurable goals for each grade. When data showed that Grade 4 students were struggling with basic arithmetic, she didn't just add more practice—she worked with teachers to introduce hands-on teaching methods using manipulatives like ten frames and Diene blocks thrice a week, making abstract concepts concrete and accessible. The data-driven approach meant every intervention was purposeful, targeted, and responsive to students' actual needs rather than assumptions.

By 2025, the results were clear: Hindi reading fluency doubled from 19% to 38%, Maths proficiency tripled with over 60% of Grade 4 students now actively solving Grade 2-level problems, and attendance rose from 50% to 75%. Andrews Ganj School became more than a school that survived the pandemic—it became proof that with the right leadership, collaboration, and conviction, every child can flourish.

## WHY HER MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS MATTER

### The Post-Pandemic Educational Crisis:

- India's prolonged school closures (March 2020–2022) created unprecedented learning loss, with over 80% of students falling below grade-level competencies in basic literacy and numeracy.
- Government schools serving both migrant and marginalised communities face

the steepest challenges, with many students experiencing their first ever systemic extended disconnection from formal education.

- Delhi's government schools saw sharp attendance drops and widening learning gaps, particularly among children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Limited parental literacy and resource constraints, including prolonged loss of already unstable income, made home-based learning nearly impossible for marginalised families.

## WHAT SHE OBSERVED

Indu Batra took charge of Andrews Ganj School in early 2020, expecting typical administrative responsibilities. Instead, the pandemic forced a nearly two-year closure that fundamentally altered everything. When she conducted her first post-pandemic assessments in 2022, the data revealed a crisis: the majority of students were performing far below their grade levels, and teachers were overwhelmed trying to address vastly different learning needs within single classrooms. But what compelled her to act wasn't just the numbers—it was watching migrant families grow increasingly disconnected from the school, unsure how to bridge the widening gap between their children and their peers. She saw teachers who wanted to help but lacked the resources, training, and support systems to design targeted interventions. She realised that rebuilding would require more than administrative fixes; it would demand a complete reimaging of how a government school could function when every stakeholder—students, teachers, parents, and partners—worked together with shared purpose and clear goals.

- Established structured daily routines – morning assemblies, peer learning circles, and wellbeing check-ins.
- Facilitated data-driven planning through yearly teacher–partner meetings where student assessment results and learning level data were analysed together to identify gaps and set clear, measurable learning goals for each grade.
- Upgraded infrastructure – library, computer lab with 20+ systems, basketball court, playground, gymnasium.
- Implemented special needs support programs and strengthened pre-primary classes.
- Renovated physical environment with painted walls, new furniture, water coolers, and safe boundary walls.
- Built teacher capacity through regular staff meetings, appreciation systems, and professional recognition.
- Transformed parent engagement – increased PTM participation from 40% to 65%, through active involvement in library, school events and celebrations, and reading activities.
- Empowered School Management Committee to conduct classroom and school walkthroughs, sharing observations and improvement suggestions with school leadership.



## MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS INITIATED BY HER

- Forged 15+ strategic partnerships with institutions like Simple Education Foundation, Soch Foundation, Buniyadi Sanskaar, The Education Alliance, and Rotary Club, Delhi.

# IMPACT

5+ years of sustained, transformative work (2020–2025)

- 50% increase in average daily attendance (from 50% in 2022 to 75% in 2025).
- 1,750+ students benefited from comprehensive learning recovery programs.
- 20+ teachers supported through capacity building and collaborative planning.
- 1,500+ community members engaged as active partners in education.
- 90%+ students progressed by one or more learning levels by 2025.
- 100% improvement in Hindi reading fluency (from 19% to 38% meeting grade-level benchmarks, Grades 1–5).
- 45% of students now read basic text in English.
- 300% increase in Grade 4 Maths proficiency (from under 20% to over 60% solving Grade 2-level problems).
- 80–100% of teachers report feeling valued and supported.



# A VOICE OF BELIEF



**Sagar Ahuja**

*Manager, Teacher Development,  
Simple Education Foundation*

*"What makes Indu Batra's leadership truly remarkable is her ability to see partnerships not as transactions, but as collaborative journeys toward shared goals. She doesn't just invite organisations into her school—she creates a culture of co-ownership where every partner, teacher, parent, and student feels invested in the transformation. Her data-driven approach ensures that every intervention is purposeful. Additionally, her generosity in sharing learnings with other school leaders demonstrates her commitment to systemic change beyond her own school's walls. Andrews Ganj isn't just a success story; it's a blueprint for what government schools can become."*

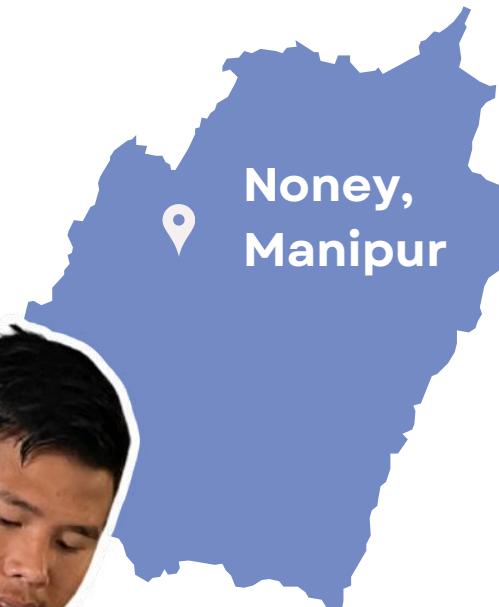


Learning Rooted in Land and Identity

# KABITHUI RONGMEI

Director of Strategy, Khaangchu Foundation

Since 2022, Kabithui Rongmei, 27, has been reimagining education for the Rongmei Naga community by creating a culturally grounded, community-led learning ecosystem that blends indigenous knowledge, academic learning, and practical livelihood skills—significantly impacting over 80 children and their families.



## One standout micro-improvement

Kabithui revived the traditional Khangchu (a traditional tribal youth dormitory serving as a cultural hub for learning traditions, skills, and community values) as a living classroom—where children learn academics, culture, and sustainable livelihoods through hands-on practice in organic agriculture.





What happens when education begins not with textbooks, but with the land, the forest, and the wisdom of elders? In the remote hills of Noney district, Manipur, Kabithui Rongmei has been answering this question by rebuilding education from the ground up. Working with the Rongmei Naga community—long marginalised and excluded from mainstream education—Kabithui recognised a painful truth: schooling had become alienating. Children were taught curricula that erased their history, dismissed indigenous knowledge, and offered little relevance to their lived realities.

The result was predictable—disengagement, high dropout rates, and a growing disconnection from both education and identity. In response, Kabithui revived the *Khangchu*, the traditional learning space of the Rongmei Nagas, and transformed it into a community-led alternative school. Here, education is contextual, collective, and deeply practical. Alongside mathematics and environmental science, children learn organic farming through research and daily practice—studying soil health, seed preservation, composting, and sustainable cultivation rooted in local ecology.

Elders mentor students, parents co-govern the school, and learning extends beyond

classrooms into fields and forests. Organic agriculture is not taught as theory, but as a pathway to self-reliance, dignity, and economic resilience. Children learn to work with their land, not leave it behind. By integrating indigenous wisdom with modern problem-solving skills, Kabithui has created an education model that restores pride, builds livelihoods, and equips children to navigate both traditional and contemporary worlds.

In *Khaangchu*, learning is not preparation for life elsewhere—it is life itself.

## WHY HIS MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS MATTER

- The Rongmei Naga community remains socio-politically unrecognised across northeast states, leaving families without consistent access to government services, mother-tongue education, cultural representation, or stable livelihood support—deepening educational exclusion and weakening young people's sense of identity and belonging.

- Primary school dropout rates reach nearly 30%; secondary dropout rates approach 50% – impacting readiness for higher education, work and life.
- Standard curricula exclude indigenous histories and knowledge systems, leading to cultural alienation.
- Lack of locally relevant education fuels cycles of unemployment, substance abuse, early marriage, and conflict.

## WHAT HE OBSERVED

Children were disengaging not because they lacked ability, but because education ignored who they were. Schools stripped learning of cultural meaning, practical skills, and pathways to dignified livelihoods.



## MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS INITIATED BY HIM

- Revived the *Khangchu* as a community-led alternative learning space.
- Developed a contextualised curriculum blending Indigenous knowledge with core academics.
- Integrated research-based organic agriculture into daily learning and practice.
- Trained and employed six local teachers from within the community.
- Established decentralised governance involving elders, parents, and village leaders.
- Used forests, farms, and community life as classrooms for experiential learning.
- Linked education with peace-building and economic resilience in a conflict-affected region.
- Launched an after-school football and wellness programme supporting holistic development.



# IMPACT

## 3+ years of sustained, transformative work (2022–2025)

- 80+ children enrolled in alternative school program and afterschool football for wellness program; 18 fully sponsored despite financial hardship (through grassroots fundraising via Kabithui's personal network at ₹500/child/month), ensuring access to free, quality education in a remote and resource-constrained region.
- 98% sustained attendance across programmes.
- 65% of learners now perform at grade level.
- 85%+ parental participation in school governance and activities.
- ₹7,00,000 worth of learning resources mobilised (via a targeted Milaap campaign supported primarily by believers in alternative education from Delhi), strengthening access to core academic materials across mathematics, science, and environmental learning.



- Organic agriculture research has created livelihood pathways for families.
- Two students were selected to represent Noney district at the Subroto International Cup (India's oldest and most prestigious school football tournament), bringing national recognition to a remote Rongmei Naga village for the first time.

## A VOICE OF BELIEF



**Ananya Mukherjee**

*Director of Programs and Impact, Khaangchu Foundation*

“What makes Kabithui’s work truly powerful is his belief that education should strengthen identity, not erase it. By reviving the Khangchu and rooting learning in land, culture, and community, he has created an ecosystem where children feel seen, capable, and proud of who they are. He has brought parents and elders from the margins into leadership, connected learning with livelihoods like organic farming, and shown that education can build dignity, resilience, and peace in a conflict-affected region. This is not just an alternative school—it is a collective reclaiming of opportunity and self-worth for the Rongmei community.”

Education as Shield and Wings

# KUMARI GUDDI<sup>®</sup>

Teacher, Utkramit Madhyamik Vidyalaya



Over the past six years, Kumari Guddi, 49, has pioneered initiatives in menstrual hygiene awareness, child marriage prevention, and disaster preparedness, directly impacting over 1,200 students. Her community-driven approach has created a replicable model of inclusive education in rural Bihar.



## One standout micro-improvement

Kumari Guddi has created a safe space for over 1,200 girls to stay in school and challenge patriarchal norms in rural Bihar.





What does it take to transform a school into a place where girls can speak freely about their health, leave behind the evils of child marriage, and build the confidence to shape their own futures? In the rural heart of Kishanganj, Bihar, Kumari Guddi has spent six years finding answers to this question. Here, child marriages are prevented through vigilant community committees, menstrual health is discussed openly, and girls receive self-defense training alongside academics.

The transformation didn't happen overnight. It began with Kumari noticing the empty desks during certain times of the month, the whispered conversations about girls being pulled out of school for marriage, the parents who remained distant from their children's education. Each observation became a call to action. She understood that real change required more than classroom teaching—it demanded reimagining the school as a hub of community transformation.

As a teacher, she has spent these past six years reaching over a thousand students with her holistic approach—creating safe spaces for dialogue, installing sanitary pad machines, organising disaster preparedness drills and coordinating eye checkups.

She moved between roles seamlessly: educator in the morning, counselor in the afternoon, community mobiliser in the evening. Her classroom extended beyond four walls to include parents, local leaders, and the wider community.

What makes her truly inspiring is her unwavering belief that every child, especially those society overlooks like girls, deserves dignity and the chance to live up to their potential. She didn't wait for perfect resources or ideal conditions to materialise. Instead, she worked with what was available, turning constraints into creative solutions and sceptics into allies. In Kumari's hands, education becomes both shield and wings.

## WHY HER MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS MATTER

**The Educational Crisis in Bihar & Kishanganj:**

- Bihar leads India with 2.77 million student dropouts (2023–24); only 40 of 100 girls complete secondary education.
- Over 42% of women aged 20–24 were married before 18.
- Kishanganj has one of the lowest literacy rates in Bihar (55.46%).
- Only 59% of Bihar's girls use hygienic menstrual protection—India's lowest.

## WHAT SHE OBSERVED

Girls missing school during menstruation, the silent threat of child marriage forcing dropouts, minimal parental engagement, unaddressed health issues like vision problems, and absence of self-defence and life skills education in this socially conservative, economically backward region.



## MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS INITIATED BY HER

- Launched menstrual hygiene campaigns with sanitary pad vending machines, question boxes, and counseling sessions.
- Formed Child Protection Committees with teachers, students, and parents to prevent child marriages.
- Engaged parents and community in school activities, creating sustained partnerships towards ensuring continued and effective learning for children.
- Integrated disaster preparedness through Safe Saturday Programme with mock drills and emergency training.
- Introduced activity-based learning, including "Slap the Board," (a competitive game where students race to identify and touch correct answers on the board) vocabulary games, and peer learning circles.
- Established English clubs to improve language and communication skills.
- Coordinated self-defense training under "Rani Lakshmibai Atmraksha Prasikshan Yojana", a government scheme to provide self-defense training to girl students.
- Facilitated health interventions including free eye checkup camps with spectacle distribution.
- Nurtured student leaders, one of whom received the "Nayika Samman" award for her outstanding contribution to the menstrual hygiene management and Kishori Manch programs.



# IMPACT

6+ years of sustained, transformative work (2019–2025)

- **Menstrual Hygiene Awareness:** 1,200+ adolescent girls benefited from awareness campaigns, sanitary pad vending machines, and counseling sessions, leading to reduced absenteeism during menstruation and increased openness about menstrual health.
- **Child Marriage Prevention:** 50+ child marriages prevented through Child Protection Committees working with teachers, students, parents, and local authorities.
- **Community Engagement:** Strengthened school-community relationships with parents transitioning from bystanders to active participants in their children's education.
- **Disaster Preparedness:** 800+ students trained through Safe Saturday Programme mock drills and emergency response training, equipping them with life-saving knowledge.



- **Activity-Based Learning:** Significant improvement in student engagement and classroom participation through "Slap the Board," vocabulary games, and peer learning circles.
- **English Language Development:** 30% improvement in English vocabulary and spoken confidence among students through English clubs and interactive learning methods.
- **Self-Defense Training:** 500+ girls empowered through training under "Rani Lakshmibai Atmraksha Prasikshan Yojana," building self-confidence and ensuring continued education.
- **Health Interventions:** 300+ students received free eye checkups with 45 students receiving free spectacles through collaboration with Lions Service Centre, improving their ability to participate in learning.

## A VOICE OF BELIEF

“

**Uday Kumar Ujjawal**

*State Programme Officer, Bihar Education Project Council*

*"What I find most inspiring about Kumari Guddi is her ability to build bridges—between school and community, between traditional values and progressive thinking, between policy and practice. She has turned parents from bystanders into active participants in their children's education. Kumari Guddi embodies the spirit of Shikshagraha—demonstrating that meaningful education leadership emerges not from grand gestures, but from countless micro-improvements rooted in deep community partnerships and an unwavering commitment to every child's dignity."*

# When Girls Learn to Kick **MAMATA BHOI**

Teacher, Bridge School

Mamata Bhoi, 25, as the first graduate from her village, has spent nearly a decade challenging deeply entrenched social norms that keep tribal and migrant children—especially girls—out of school. Her bold interventions in menstrual hygiene awareness, child marriage prevention, and girls' sports have directly impacted over 1,250 children and reduced the rates of child labour and child marriage in her village.



## One standout micro-improvement

Mamata Bhoi formed an all-girls football team that won the AJSA Champions League 2025—a first-of-its-kind regional tournament in western Odisha featuring 20 teams from three districts and drawing over 5,500 spectators. In a region where girls face restrictions on public presence, her team's victory used sports to shatter social barriers and prove that tribal girls deserve to compete, occupy public space, and win.





On a dusty field in Bangomunda village, a group of girls in football jerseys run drills, calling out strategies and words of encouragement to each other. A decade ago, this scene was unthinkable. In this remote corner of Balangir district, Odisha, girls were expected to stay home after a certain age, avoid public spaces, never wear sports uniforms, and certainly never play football. But Mamata Bhoi, the first graduate from her village, understood that education alone wouldn't break the cycle of poverty and limited opportunities for girls—she needed to challenge the social norms that kept girls invisible, silent, and confined.

As a barefoot teacher (a term referring to dedicated educators who often work in challenging, underserved environments) at Bridge School since 2016, she didn't just teach reading and Maths in her mother tongue using leaves, matchsticks, and local stories. She brought yoga, dance, and sports into her classroom—radical acts in a community where such activities were forbidden for girls. She spoke openly about menstruation in spaces where the topic had always been wrapped in shame. When families planned child marriages, she didn't accept "no" from them—she returned to their homes again and again, pleading: "Iski shaadi mat karo, abhi padhegi ye"

Don't marry her off, she'll study now). "Aise bol ke nahi maante log" (People don't listen just by being told), she says, "**lekin main koshish karti hoon, aur karti rahoongi**" (But I try, and I will keep trying).

Her most powerful intervention came through football. She formed an all-girls team that won the AJSA Champions League 2025—each kick breaking centuries of restrictions, each goal opening space for what girls could become. Over nearly 10 years, she has contributed to making her village child-marriage-free and child-labour-free, and increased girls' school enrolment by over 60%. In Mamata's hands, education becomes more than literacy—it becomes the courage to claim space, voice, and dignity.

## WHY HER MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS MATTER

### When School Isn't Enough for Girls to Stay:

- Generational poverty and seasonal migration to brick kilns force children to replace learning with labour and play with both their survival and future.
- Schools, when they exist, are far from homes, poorly staffed, and lack basic infrastructure—many children reach Grade 10 unable to read or write fluently.
- Girls face compounded barriers: the farther the school, the less likely she'll attend due to safety concerns, household duties, and caregiving responsibilities.
- Child marriage remains widespread, with adolescent girls routinely pulled out of school for early marriage, cutting short both education and personal growth.
- Poor nutrition weakens children's ability to learn, as poverty limits access to adequate food. This makes classrooms feel like burdens rather than spaces of possibility.
- Deep-rooted social norms create the most insurmountable barriers: menstruation taboos silence girls, modesty restrictions prevent movement, and cultural norms discourage dance, play, and sports—all essential to holistic development.
- Even wearing school uniforms after a certain age is frowned upon, and girls are systematically restricted from public spaces and physical activities.
- Traditional teaching methods promote children on paper without real learning, as education doesn't resonate with local context or lived realities.

## WHAT SHE OBSERVED

As the first graduate from Bangomunda village, Mamata witnessed how poverty, migration, and social taboos pushed children—especially girls—out of school entirely. She saw that formal schooling existed but remained culturally distant and pedagogically ineffective. She recognised that child marriage wasn't just a family decision but a structural problem rooted in gender discrimination. She understood that until the tight grip of social norms was directly confronted—norms around menstruation, girls' mobility, sports participation, and public presence—education would remain inaccessible and irrelevant regardless of how many schools were built.



## MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS INITIATED BY HER

- Conducted repeated interventions against child marriage, returning to families multiple times with the plea: "Iski shaadi mat karo, abhi padhegi ye".

- Worked within a larger grassroots movement to contribute towards creating child-marriage-free and child-labour-free villages.
- Taught life skills including prevention of child sexual abuse, menstrual hygiene, and importance of staying in school, empowering students to become peer educators.
- Created safe spaces for menstrual hygiene education, openly discussing topics wrapped in shame and allowing girls to ask questions without stigma.
- Developed child-centred, mother-tongue pedagogy using colours, natural materials (leaves, matchsticks), local stories, and movement to make learning playful and culturally relevant.
- Introduced yoga, dance, and sports into curriculum—bold interventions in communities where girls face severe restrictions on physical activity and public presence.
- Used her passion for dance as both expression and teaching method, modelling that movement belongs to girls as much as boys.
- Organised participation in dance competitions to build confidence and normalise girls' presence in public performance.
- Led plantation drives inspiring environmental awareness, with students collectively planting hundreds of trees through the "Plants for Tomorrow" campaign.



# IMPACT

Nearly 10 years of sustained, transformative work (2016–2025)

- **Child marriage:** Village made child-marriage-free through persistent intervention and community engagement; multiple child marriages prevented through repeated family level interventions.
- **Child labour:** Contributed to child-labour-free status as part of broader movement spanning 28 villages across Balangir district.
- **School enrolment:** 60%+ increase in girls' school enrolment in the region through sustained efforts to shift attitudes towards girls' education.
- **Primary education and healthcare:** 1,250+ tribal and migrant children directly provided access to quality primary education and basic healthcare in joyful learning environments.
- **Social taboos:** Menstrual hygiene normalised through safe conversations and peer education networks; Girls' mobility and public presence expanded through sports, dance, and classroom participation.
- **Cultural shift:** Girls now claim space, voice, and physical activity previously forbidden by social norms.
- **Life skills:** 2,470+ children impacted beyond the classroom through life skills education, becoming peer educators themselves.
- **Community support:** 15,300+ people impacted over 10 years across the community.

# A VOICE OF BELIEF

“

**Lalita Waldia**

Communication Lead, AJSA India

*"What makes Mamata truly exceptional is her understanding that in communities like Bangomunda, the battle for education is inseparable from the battle against social norms. She knew that teaching children means little if girls can't leave their homes, if menstruation keeps them ashamed, if child marriage ends their education at 14. So she didn't just open a classroom—she opened possibilities. When she formed that all-girls football team, she was declaring that girls deserve to run, compete, and win. When she speaks openly about menstruation, she's dismantling shame. When she returns repeatedly to prevent child marriages, she's showing that some fights are worth repeating. As the first graduate from her village, Mamata represents what's possible, and through her work, she's ensuring she won't be the last."*



Hands That Build, Minds That Wonder

# NELLORI SUBRAHMANYAM



Science teacher, District Science Center

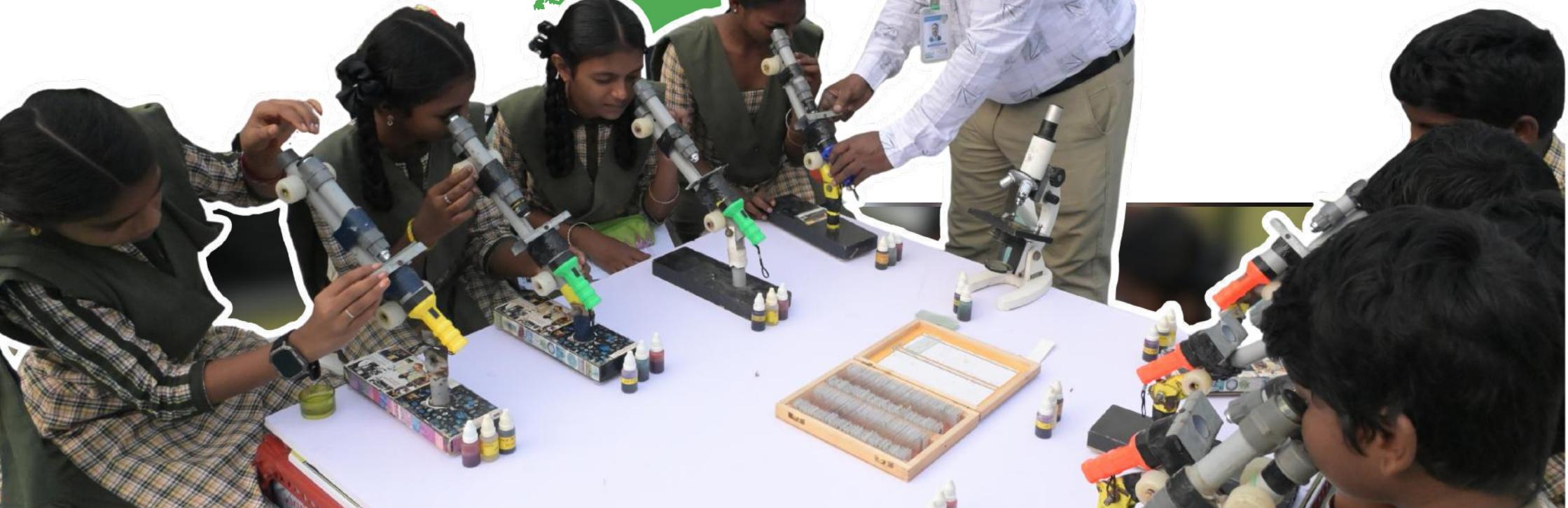
Over his 28-year teaching career, Nellori Subrahmanyam, 51, has revolutionised rural science education by replacing rote memorisation with hands-on experimentation, transforming how over 55,000 students experience learning.

**Nellore, Andhra Pradesh**



**One standout micro-improvement**

He brought science alive for 55,000+ rural students through innovative programs like Science on Wheels, student-built telescopes and microscopes, and an Astro-Tourism initiative that revealed the wonders of the cosmos to children who had never looked through a telescopic lens.





In a village school in Nellore, a group of students peer through a telescope they built themselves, gasping as lunar craters and mountains come into focus for the first time. Nearby, another class examines slides they prepared under microscopes they constructed with 1000x magnification. In the courtyard, students document butterfly species in their self-maintained nature garden while others test soil samples and prepare biofertilisers using Azospirillum and Rhizobium (beneficial soil bacteria used as biofertilisers). This is not an elite science academy—this is the everyday reality that Nellore Subrahmanyam has built across rural Andhra Pradesh over 28 years.

Coming from a humble tribal family along canal banks, he experienced firsthand how India's exam-oriented education system fails rural children. Textbook memorisation and question-answer patterns ignored what rural students naturally excel at: sensorimotor skills, observation, and hands-on learning rooted in their daily interactions with the environment. Where others saw inevitable dropouts and disengagement, Subrahmanyam saw untapped potential. He pioneered a complete transformation of rural science education—establishing the "Rural Children Research Center" equipped with advanced instruments and creating "Science on Wheels"

mobile labs that bring experiments to remote villages. He has launched the "Astro-Tourism Program" that has given 55,000 students practical astronomy experience, and developed constructivist methods (learning by doing) where students don't just read about science but build microscopes, conduct field research, create mathematical models, and present their findings.

His students have gained national recognition: one developed a Soil Health Card, another built a low-cost rotating globe, others conducted butterfly research and fabricated astronomical models inspired by Jaipur's Jantar Mantar. What makes Subrahmanyam's work particularly effective is his understanding that rural children's natural learning style—rooted in observation, physical activity, and direct experience—is not a disadvantage to overcome but a strength to harness. In his hands, science education becomes what it should always be: a tool for curiosity, discovery, and empowerment.

## WHY HIS MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS MATTER

### The Crisis in Rural Science Education:

- India's education system emphasises rote learning and exam performance as the sole indicator of achievement, over critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills, particularly disadvantaged rural students.
- Inadequate teacher training and limited access to effective pedagogical methods perpetuate memorisation-focused instruction that disconnects students from meaningful learning.
- Traditional textbook-based instruction ignores rural children's natural strengths: strong sensorimotor skills, observational abilities, and learning through direct environmental interaction.
- The mismatch between urban-designed curricula and rural learning styles leads to widespread disengagement, learning difficulties, and dropout rates.
- Science labs in rural schools, when they exist, often contain unused equipment and focus on demonstrations rather than student-led experimentation.
- Rural students rarely access advanced scientific instruments, field research opportunities, or mentorship that could nurture scientific thinking and innovation.

## WHAT HE OBSERVED

From his own rural schooling experience in Nellore, he recognised that rural children naturally learn through observation, physical activity, and hands-on engagement—much like agricultural practices where skills develop through repeated practice and experimentation. He witnessed how imposing rote-based methods on these naturally observant, physically engaged learners creates failure rather than success. He saw textbook science failing to spark curiosity while students' daily interactions with soil, weather, plants, and animals went unexplored. He understood that without fundamentally reimagining how science is taught in rural contexts, generations of potential scientists, researchers, and critical thinkers would be lost to an incompatible educational approach.



## MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS INITIATED BY HIM

- Guided students in building 1000x magnification microscopes, preparing slides, and exploring microscopic worlds independently.
- Implemented project-based learning - students surveyed fertiliser use, tested soil samples, and prepared biofertilisers using Azospirillum and Rhizobium.
- Created astronomical observatory and mathematical models where students studied Jantar Mantar instruments and constructed models demonstrating retrograde motion, eclipses, and seasonal changes.
- Established astronomy learning and telescope use activities using 10-inch professional telescopes, interactive Moon–Earth and globe models, and activity sheets on lunar phases and celestial mechanics.
- Launched Butterfly Nature Project developing ecological awareness through species documentation and host plant studies.
- Designed large-scale learning materials and interactive posters (40\*48 inches) for concept visualisation, recognised by IIT Tirupati.
- Established Rural Children Research Center equipped with microscopes, advanced telescope, comprehensive library, and research facilities.
- Created Science on Wheels mobile lab bringing interactive exhibits, butterfly garden, weather station, and mini observatory to remote village schools.
- Developed Astro-Tourism Program: Astronomy for All with daytime workshops on ancient Indian astronomy, Jantar Mantar models, celestial navigation, sundial experiments, plus night sky observations and telescope training.
- Implemented Budding Scientist Program guiding 8th–9th graders through hypothesis building, observing biogeochemical cycles, field visits, and project creation.
- Launched Cosmos Digital Learning Series with bilingual astronomy content, personalised kits, and critical thinking exercises.
- Designed Constructivist Classroom Learning Modules with low-cost STEM kits, mini science fairs, collaborative experiments, and interactive games aligned with NEP 2020.

# IMPACT

- **Scientific literacy advanced:** Instilled scientific temper in rural communities through accessible astronomy, ecology, and research experiences. 25,000+ students observed lunar mountains, craters, and seas; thousands of students reached through Science on Wheels mobile lab across remote villages in Andhra Pradesh; 500+ rural students annually benefit from the Budding Scientist Program.
- **21st-century skills nurtured:** Cultivated creativity, collaboration, problem-solving, and independent scientific thinking.
- **National recognition for student innovations:** Supported students in Soil Health Card development, low-cost rotating globe creation, research on butterflies, Kanigiri Reservoir study, compound microscope fabrication, astronomical model building inspired by Jantar Mantar.



- **Learning outcomes shift:** Enhanced conceptual clarity, scientific reasoning, critical thinking, and ability to apply knowledge practically; increased student confidence and curiosity through field studies, data collection, and research report writing.
- **Pedagogical shift:** Spearheaded transformation from memorisation to experimentation, from passive learning to active inquiry, from exam focus to genuine understanding.
- **Teacher capacity:** Strengthened through demonstration of constructivist methods that thousands of educators can replicate.

## A VOICE OF BELIEF

“

**Bodda Srinivasa Rao**

*State Project Director  
Samagra Shiksha, Andhra Pradesh*

*“What makes Subrahmanyam’s work truly exceptional is how he reimagined science education for rural contexts—from memorisation to discovery. Drawing on his own tribal roots, he recognised rural children’s observational and hands-on skills as strengths, not deficits. By encouraging students to build their own scientific tools, conduct local field research, and study their own ecosystems, he nurtured genuine scientific thinking. Through his initiatives, he hasn’t just demonstrated science—he has trained young scientists. Over 28 years, he has shown that when education respects lived experience, students from rural areas often surpass expectations in demonstrating creativity and applying curiosity.”*

From Chalkboards to Chatbots: Reimagining Public Schools in Assam

# PRASENJIT SARMA

Assistant Teacher and Block Resource Person, Samagra Shiksha

Prasenjit Sarma, 38, has pioneered the integration of Artificial Intelligence in Indian education, creating a suite of innovative apps and tools that generate over 16,000 lesson plans daily and have benefited lakhs of students and teachers across India.



## One standout micro-improvement

He brought Artificial Intelligence to rural classrooms through innovative apps that generate lesson plans in six seconds, provide free tutoring to underprivileged students, and make learning joyful for children across India.





A teacher in rural Assam opens her phone at 7 a.m., types in their subject and topic, and within six seconds receives a complete, NEP-aligned lesson plan ready for their class. A student who cannot afford private tuition asks questions to a virtual teacher, in Assamese, and gets instant explanations. An education official unsure about implementing NIPUN Bharat guidelines opens a chatbot and finds answers in their own language.

This is not a vision of some distant future—this is the everyday reality that Prasenjit Sarma has built in Barpeta District and beyond. As a Block Resource Person conducting academic inspections, he witnessed the quiet struggles that rarely make headlines, but are commonplace: rural schools crippled by teacher shortages, underprivileged students denied access to quality education, and educators confused by policy reforms like NEP 2020. Where others saw insurmountable systemic barriers, Prasenjit saw an opportunity for technology to bridge gaps with dignity and scale.

Over the past decade, he has created an entire ecosystem of AI-powered tools—the

Lesson Plan Creator AI, AI Teacher, NIPUN (Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Proficiency) Mitra chatbot, GameVerse, and the Sameeksha evaluation platform—each designed to solve a specific, real problem faced by teachers and students. His innovations generate over 16,000 lesson plans daily across India, operate in 100+ languages including Assamese and Bodo, and have been recognised by Assam's Chief Minister and acknowledged by NITI Aayog and featured in The Hindu, Times of India, India Today, Doordarshan, and The Sentinel.

But what makes Prasenjit's work truly transformative is not the technology itself—it's his unwavering commitment to ensuring that the benefits of AI reach those who need it most: the rural teacher preparing tomorrow's class after a long day, the first-generation learner with no tuition support, the regional language educator seeking quality resources. In his hands, artificial intelligence becomes a force for education equity.

## WHY HIS MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS MATTER

- Teacher shortages in rural and remote schools force single teachers to manage multiple classes simultaneously, severely compromising student learning.
- Lack of time and learning opportunities prevents teachers from preparing activity-based, differentiated, contextual lesson plans aligned with NEP 2020 and Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) goals.
- Students from economically weaker sections cannot afford private tuition, creating massive learning inequities, especially for first-generation learners.
- Limited awareness and understanding of NEP 2020, National Curriculum Framework, NIPUN Bharat, and NIPUN Axom (Assam's foundational literacy and numeracy mission for primary students) among frontline educators and officials hampers effective policy implementation.
- Rural students, thus lack access to joyful, game-based digital learning experiences that make education engaging and effective.
- Some teachers also struggle with English writing and proofreading, limiting their ability to create error-free teaching materials.
- Language barriers prevent regional language teachers and students from accessing modern pedagogical tools and resources.

## WHAT HE OBSERVED

During academic inspections across Barpeta, he saw teachers arriving early to school and leaving late. The number of hours did not translate into quality lesson plans or delivering quality education. He witnessed single teachers managing five different grade levels in one classroom. He met bright students whose families couldn't afford the 500-rupee monthly tuition that their peers paid, and how it led them to fall behind, despite their potential. He found educators genuinely wanting to implement NEP 2020 but lacking accessible resources to understand it. He realised that without innovative, scalable, and inclusive solutions, government school teachers and students would remain perpetually disadvantaged compared to their urban or private school counterparts.



## MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS INITIATED BY HIM

- Built NIPUN Mitra chatbot offering multilingual guidance on NEP 2020, NCF, NIPUN Bharat, and NIPUN Axom, generating FLN-specific lesson plans in 100+ languages.
- Designed AI Proofreading Assistant to help teachers and students prepare grammatically accurate content.
- Launched AI Writing Assistant for essays, articles, reports, and research support.
- Authored five widely-used books: *Artificial Intelligence & Robotics* (CBSE/SEBA curriculum), *Teacher's Handbook on FLN Outcomes*, *Modern Techniques of Teaching English*, *BaLA – A Guide for Teachers*, and *Reading Corner*.
- Prepared three workbooks for students to strengthen foundational literacy and numeracy.
- Established Assam's first Digital Classroom and Hanging Library (an innovative approach to promoting love for reading by creating visually appealing and accessible reading spaces) through crowdfunding.
- Spread learning through AI & Robotics seminars across districts to build technology literacy.
- Partnered with Childline India for child safety awareness, JSI India for nutrition and menstrual hygiene education, and WASH Institute for sanitation practices.



# IMPACT

10+ years of sustained, transformative work (2014–2025)

- 16,000+ lesson plans generated daily across India through AI tools.
- Lakhs of students and teachers have benefited from AI Teacher, AI Proofreading Assistant, and AI Writing Assistant.
- 2.3 lakh students assessed across 2,000+ schools through Sameeksha Mock Gunotsav App with real-time data.
- Thousands of teachers supported the NIPUN Mitra chatbot with instant guidance on NEP 2020, NCF, and FLN frameworks.
- Thousands of children are experiencing joyful learning through GameVerse's 16 educational games.
- 10,000+ teachers trained in digital pedagogy and ICT-based (Information and Communication Technology training) content creation.
- Improved attendance and reduced dropout rates in Barpeta schools with Digital Classroom and Hanging Library initiatives.



- Regional language inclusivity strengthened through tools in Assamese, Bodo, and 100+ Indian languages.
- Equity advanced for rural, minority, and underprivileged students across Barpeta District and beyond.
- Nominated for prestigious National Teachers' Award 2025.

## A VOICE OF BELIEF



**Chandan Kumar Das**

*Block Resource Person, Samagra Shiksha,  
Barpeta District, Assam*

*"What sets Prasenjit apart is his ability to translate complex technology into practical classroom solutions. He built these tools from [spending] years in rural classrooms, listening to exhausted teachers and watching students struggle without support. His Lesson Plan Creator restores dignity to overworked teachers. His AI Teacher democratises quality education for marginalised children. By ensuring his innovations work in Assamese and Bodo, he proved that artificial intelligence, designed with empathy and equity, can be education's most powerful equaliser."*

Growing Change from the Ground Up

# SAVITA SAHU

Anganwadi Worker, Bithiya

Savita Sahu, 56, has transformed barren land into productive farmland and established a kitchen garden through innovative self-funding initiatives, creating a sustainable model for early childhood education that reduces reliance on government resources.

Raipur,  
Chhattisgarh



## One standout micro-improvement

Savita Sahu converted a barren patch into arable farmland to fund her Anganwadi's transformation, proving that resourcefulness and vision can overcome financial constraints. Her community-driven work in nutrition, infrastructure, and child leadership has redefined what an Anganwadi can become when communities lead from within.





For years, the Anganwadi in Bithiya was a place parents visited briefly and children outgrew quickly—a feeding point, not a learning space. Today, it is a vibrant centre where children tend gardens, lead daily routines, and learn through play. This shift did not come from increased funding or external intervention, but from Savita Sahu's commitment to building a quality learning space by mobilising local resources and community support rather than waiting for external help.

Faced with severe financial constraints and a barren Anganwadi centre that neither inspired children nor attracted parents, she refused to wait for resources that might never arrive. Instead, she cultivated a piece of barren land into productive cultivable land, using the income from its harvest to rebuild her centre brick by brick. Today, children at her Anganwadi dig their hands into a thriving kitchen garden, learning about nutrition whilst eating meals made from vegetables they themselves grew.

A Bal Cabinet teaches even the young children responsibility and leadership. Community members who once saw the centre merely as a feeding station now actively participate in celebrations, maintenance, and decision-making. What makes

Savita truly inspiring is her profound understanding that sustainable change grows from local resources and community ownership. In Savita's hands, scarcity becomes the seed of innovation.

## WHY HER MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS MATTER

### Anganwadi Centres: The Struggle for Resources and Recognition:

- Anganwadi centres across rural India face chronic underfunding, limiting their ability to provide quality early childhood care and education. Poor infrastructure and operating from cramped, uninviting spaces fail to stimulate young learners.
- Malnutrition continues to affect millions of children under six, with limited resources for fresh, nutritious meals. Community perception often reduces these centres to mere nutrition distribution points rather than holistic development hubs.
- Financial constraints prevent procurement of essential teaching materials, furniture, and facility improvements, while low parental engagement undermines children's learning outcomes and school readiness.

## WHAT SHE OBSERVED

At her Anganwadi in Bithiya, she witnessed a centre that was neither child-friendly nor conducive to learning. Severe budget limitations delayed essential improvements and restricted teaching materials, parents showed minimal interest and viewed the centre only as a place for meals rather than education. Children lacked opportunities for active play-based learning and leadership development, and there was inadequate nutrition provision despite the centre's mandate to support children's physical growth. Most critically, she realised that waiting for external resources meant children would continue missing out on their crucial early years.



## MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS INITIATED BY HER

- Transformed barren land into productive agricultural space, using harvest income to fund centre improvements.

- Established a kitchen garden providing fresh vegetables for children's meals and serving as a hands-on learning space.
- Introduced the Bal Cabinet system where children lead cleanliness checks, prayers, and daily organisation, developing responsibility and leadership.
- Organised regular festival celebrations involving parents and community members to strengthen bonds and participation.
- Formed Yuva Sangathan—a group of teenage boys and girls—to support centre activities and bridge generational gaps.
- Conducted regular parent meetings, home visits, and awareness programmes to shift perceptions about early childhood education, and its importance.
- Collaborated with the panchayat (village governance body) and community members to mobilise resources for infrastructure maintenance and improvements.
- Contributed personal funds during financial shortfalls to ensure continuous development.



# IMPACT

## 34 years of sustained, transformative work (1991–2025)

- 1,000+ children directly benefited during her tenure.
- 2,000+ parents engaged through awareness programmes and community activities.
- 35–40 children attend Anganwadi annually; 300 households benefit through awareness campaigns on government health schemes, nutrition education, and festival celebrations that strengthen community bonds.
- Transformed infrastructure: barren, unwelcoming space converted into a vibrant, child-friendly centre with improved facilities.
- Enhanced nutrition: kitchen garden provides fresh vegetables, reducing costs whilst improving meal quality and serving as an educational tool.
- Improved learning outcomes: activity-based learning and Bal Cabinet system develop leadership, cleanliness habits, and school readiness.



- Increased community participation: parents and residents now actively engaged in programmes, celebrations, and centre maintenance.
- Sustainable funding model: agricultural project generates ongoing income for facility improvements without relying solely on government budgets.
- Intergenerational collaboration: Yuva Sanghatan creates a support network of teenagers assisting with activities and events.

# A VOICE OF BELIEF

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**Anuj Kumar Gupta**

*Programme Manager, Eduweave Foundation*

*"Savita Ji refuses to let financial limitations define what's possible for children. When she saw barren land, she saw potential—not just for crops, but for funding a vision of what her Anganwadi could become. When she planted that kitchen garden, she created more than fresh vegetables; she created a living classroom where children learn where food comes from and why nutrition matters. But most remarkably, she's transformed how our entire community views early childhood education. Parents don't just drop their children off anymore—they stay, they participate, they celebrate with us. Savita Ji has proven that with creativity and commitment, even the tightest constraints can yield abundant harvests."*

Building Belonging, One Child at a Time

# DR. URFANA A MOHARKEN

Teacher, Boys Higher Secondary School Soura

Dr. Urfana Amin Moharken, 52, has transformed early childhood and inclusive education through personalised learning plans, teacher training, and community partnerships with civil society organisations (CSOs) including Eduweave, Pratham, Jammu & Kashmir Association of Social Workers (JKASW), and UNICEF.



## One standout micro-improvement

Urfana's innovative approach to using recycled materials and peer support systems has impacted over 500 students, particularly children with special needs, creating a replicable model of dignified, sustainable inclusion in Kashmir's classrooms.





Urfana Amin Moharken believes that belonging isn't something you create through a single programme—it's something you build through daily practice. In the BHSS Soura cluster, that belief has quietly rewritten classroom norms. Children who once sat unnoticed at the back now lead discussions, design learning materials with their peers, and move through school with the confidence of being seen.

The shift began with small observations: a little girl who stopped coming to school because she couldn't follow the lessons, a shy boy who never answered questions because he couldn't see the blackboard clearly, a mother who admitted she didn't understand her son's homework but wished she could help. Each moment became a catalyst for change. Difference, here, is no longer a reason for separation, but a source of strength. Children with special needs now lead group discussions, create learning materials alongside their peers, and discover that difference doesn't mean disconnection. A boy who once sketched alone during lessons now anchors a maths activity designed around his artistic talents. Parents who avoided school now volunteer to craft teaching aids from waste.

Through personalised learning plans, buddy systems, hands-on teacher training, and early childhood activity modules that spark imagination, Urfana has reached over 500 students—transforming not just academic outcomes, but the very culture of learning. She works within Kashmir's complex socio-political context, where families often remain uncertain about engaging with educational institutions and schools operate with limited budgets. Yet she has proved that meaningful inclusion doesn't require grand resources—it requires profound commitment.

## WHY HER MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS MATTER

### The Reality Facing Classrooms in Srinagar:

- Kashmir faces significant educational disparities, with children with special needs (CWSN) particularly marginalised in mainstream classrooms.
- Early childhood care and education (ECCE) infrastructure remains limited, with developmental delays often unaddressed due to lack of specialised resources and teacher training.
- In secondary grades, learning gaps widen as faster learners progress whilst others struggle silently, with limited focus on future readiness and life skills that prepare students for further education or employment.
- The region's socio-political context adds layers of complexity, with families uncertain about engaging with educational institutions and schools operating with limited budgets for specialised materials.



## WHAT SHE OBSERVED

In the Soura cluster, she witnessed children with special needs sitting isolated at the back of classrooms, while learning materials were either prohibitively expensive or irrelevant to local contexts. Teachers lacked training in inclusive pedagogy, and low parental engagement widened learning gaps. Children with vision or hearing difficulties couldn't access lessons, and ECCE classes expected children with developmental delays to "catch up" without tailored support. Most critically, she saw that difference meant isolation—and isolation meant dropping out.



## MICRO-IMPROVEMENTS INITIATED BY HER

- Designed personalised, multisensory learning plans for each child with special needs, supported by assistive technology.
- Established peer buddy systems pairing students for academic support and companionship.
- Led hands-on teacher training workshops on adapting lessons for inclusive classrooms.
- Created "learning circles" for parents to experience classroom activities themselves, building confidence and engagement.
- Collaborated with CSOs (Eduweave, Pratham, JKASW, UNICEF) to develop ECCE activity modules using storytelling, play-based learning, and Jadui Pitara resources (a play-based learning kit for India's Foundational Stage (ages 3-8), developed by NCERT).
- Pioneered recycling initiatives transforming bottles into counting tools, cardboard into puzzles, newspapers into maps.
- Encouraged student-led creation of learning materials, turning children into co-creators.
- Built structured support systems ensuring no child eats lunch alone or remains unheard.



## IMPACT

### 500+ students impacted, with significant focus on children with special needs

- 30% increase in CWSN participation in group activities, with notable literacy and social skills gains.
- 50% rise in parental engagement, with families actively supporting learning at home.
- 40% improvement in retention rates through activity-based methods.
- Teacher capacity strengthened – colleagues now independently adapt materials for inclusion.
- 80% of students engaged in recycling campaigns; annual material costs reduced by approximately 90%.
- Transformed school culture where children greet each other by name and classrooms buzz with shared activity.



## A VOICE OF BELIEF



### Amita Kaushik

Director, EduWeave Foundation

*"Urfana Amin doesn't just teach inclusive education—she lives it. What sets her apart is her ability to see potential where others see limitations. She's turned waste into wonder, peers into partners, and parents into allies. Her early childhood modules have become reference points for other schools in the cluster. But perhaps her greatest achievement is this: in her classroom, every child knows they matter. That sense of belonging is something you can't measure in statistics alone—though her results speak for themselves. She's proven that inclusion isn't about grand resources; it's about profound commitment."*





# Acknowledgments

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Our deepest gratitude to the nominators who recognised leadership worth celebrating—educators quietly building trust, communities and schools working together, and state systems enabling change. What unfolds in these pages reveals what becomes possible when education transforms into a people's movement. To the awardees and nominees whose quiet work speaks louder than any recognition—your dedication inspired these narratives.

Together, the leaders celebrated here and those who brought them to light are weaving a network of shared practice, ensuring every child in India leaves school prepared not just for exams, but for life and work. This is the future we're building, one story at a time.







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