

Small Steps To Build Great Schools

Volume II

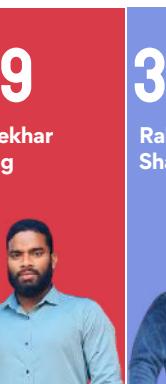


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Volume II

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Foreword

Education has the power to transform not just individuals, but entire communities. Across India, thousands of teachers, school leaders, and community members work quietly every day to make learning meaningful for children — often with limited resources, yet with immense dedication and heart.

Yet, when we think about change in education, we often imagine sweeping reforms or large-scale initiatives. But true transformation often begins in smaller, quieter ways — through one idea, one leader, one school. These small, purposeful actions, taken consistently, can create ripples that lead to lasting change.

This is the essence of micro-improvements: small, focused steps that solve real challenges in classrooms, schools, or communities. These

actions may seem simple at first, but they build momentum, nurture confidence, and inspire others to act. Over time, they create a culture of continuous learning and collective progress.

The leaders featured in this book embody this spirit. Each one has taken thoughtful steps to make education more inclusive, joyful, and rooted in belonging. As educator Champa Saha beautifully reminds us, *“Every child has a right to belong. Why should a school be a place meant only for some children?”* Her words capture the heart of what these leaders stand for — ensuring that every child, regardless of gender, caste, class, socioeconomic status or ability, finds a place where they are seen, valued, and supported to thrive.

Across the pages that follow, you’ll encounter



Kumari Shibul

*Patron - Shikshagraha and Founder & Chairperson,
The Shibul Family Philanthropic Initiatives*

stories that are as diverse as the regions they come from — yet united by a shared intent: to prepare children for the future with confidence, curiosity, and compassion.

From the hills of Nagaland, English teacher Peleno Petenilhu helps her students find their voice again, turning hesitation into confidence

through care, creativity, and peer learning. In Andhra Pradesh, mathematics teacher Moturi Mangarani blends technology, puppetry, and play to make learning joyful and to inspire teachers across India to innovate. In Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh, Rajeev Kumar Yadav rebuilt trust in public education through empathy-driven leadership that revived teacher morale and student attendance. And in Bihar, Rajmuni Devi leads Shiksha Chaupals that bring girls back to classrooms, transforming education into a movement for equality and dignity.

Each of these stories — unique in context, yet similar in intent — shows what is possible when educators lead with empathy, courage, and imagination. Curated from diverse geographies and contexts, these stories celebrate leaders who have worked in challenging environments — rural and urban, resource-rich and resource-poor — yet have never relented in their commitment to children's learning. Their work shows that meaningful change is not defined by scale, but by sincerity and consistency.

It is this belief that guides our work at Shikshagraha — the people's movement for education equity — the conviction that education is the greatest equaliser and empowering education leaders is central to building a stronger, more equitable public education system. Along with the movement partners, we are witnessing how leadership at every level, from head teachers and administrators to parents and community members, can shift mindsets and create meaningful impact.

This collection celebrates them. Those who lead with empathy, courage, and imagination. It is also an invitation to every educator, policymaker, and citizen to recognise and support the everyday leaders who make education work.

May these stories inspire more leaders to act with empathy and courage, more collaboration across communities, and deeper belief in the power of everyday leadership to create lasting change.

In Picture: Student Performance at Government Primary School in Shinnyu village, Mon district, Nagaland



From the Curators' Desk

Great schools are not built overnight; they are built through countless small steps taken by people who care deeply about children. This second volume of *Small Steps to Build Great Schools* builds on the momentum of Shikshagraha. It is a celebration of these steps, and the education leaders across India who take them quietly, consistently, and often without recognition.

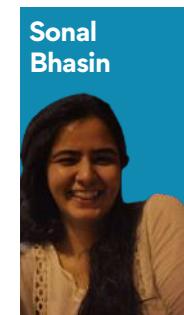
This volume brings together 17 such stories from across the country, stories of leaders who moved forward not with fearlessness, but with possibility; not with authority, but with empathy; not with perfection, but with purpose. Together, these stories embody the micro-improvement mindset that Shikshagraha champions - showcasing what it can achieve

when combined with local wisdom, community trust, and a belief that every child deserves a school built around dignity and learning.

As we release this edition, we hope it becomes more than a publication. We hope it becomes a reminder of what Shikshagraha stands for — that building great schools is not a distant dream; it is an everyday practice. It happens in small rooms, in rural classrooms, in morning assemblies, in mid-day meal sheds, in staff meetings, in parent conversations, and in the quiet determination of leaders who choose children first, every single day.

Here's to the educators who make our public education system stronger.

The Curators



Stories of Leaders Within the Formal Education System:

Individuals working within schools, government, or institutional frameworks

The needs and requirements of individual schools — and even neighbouring blocks, clusters, districts — can differ drastically, even though they may only be a few kilometres apart. A variety of factors shape access and how students learn. What does not vary is the commitment and spirit of education leaders — teachers, administrators, school heads, cluster-, block- and district-level officials — to enable quality education for our children and prepare them for the future.

These leaders are present across the country - in urban, rural and remote contexts alike. They continuously design and implement relevant, necessary, innovative micro-improvements to ensure every student receives an enriching learning experience.

Their leadership takes many forms. Some encourage excellence with a promise of an aeroplane ride for merit holders. Some get teachers in an entire block to embrace play-based learning for tiny-tots. Some rebuild trust

in the school system broken through years of severe conflict and disruption.

At Shikshagraha, we work alongside our government and civil society partners to co-create programs and implementation pathways that support these education leaders at all levels. The stories that follow celebrate some of these leaders - individuals who are building public schools that every family is proud to choose — one micro-improvement at a time.

Peleno Petenilhu

Facilitating Student Confidence and Achievement



Who She Is

Peleno Petenilhu, an English teacher at John Government Higher Secondary School (GHSS), Viswema, Kohima, is among Nagaland's most inspiring educators. The youngest of three siblings, she grew up in a multicultural household, surrounded by the warmth of a large extended family where education was both a calling and a community service. Her home was always full of voices, stories, and the deep-rooted values passed down through generations. In her, family books weren't just read; they were cherished.

Literature was the thread that connected them, igniting their imaginations and instilling in them a quiet reverence for knowledge. Her parents and two paternal aunts have been passionate educators. They shaped her understanding that teaching is not just a job — it is a way to transform the lives of children.

With most of her close ones working as educators, she learnt that students in different school settings — private and government — often have distinct experiences that shape their

learning, confidence, and aspirations in unique ways. Realising how these environments influence young minds inspired her deeply. Additionally, her mother's concern for these disparities became a powerful source of motivation for her. "I wanted to bring the same quality of learning experience and confidence I saw in students from private schools to government schools," she recalls.

Since 2003, she has ensured that students discover the joy of learning and find

confidence in expressing themselves. In her current role at John GHSS, Viswema, she teaches English and Alternative English (study and analysis of literary works, including global classics and Indian writings in English) to Grades 11 & 12. Her school, though small, with only six teachers (at the higher secondary level) and a modest student body, buzzes with creativity, confidence, and warmth, largely due to her influence.

Outside of her professional life, Peleno finds solace in reading. From *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* in her childhood to *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Little Prince* during her teenage years, books have built her empathy, patience, and curiosity — qualities she now brings into her classroom.

The Problem She Saw

Soon after joining John GHSS, she noticed how hesitant students were to express themselves, especially in English. Many came from rural or low income backgrounds, where communication in English was minimal. Traditional teaching methods had conditioned them to listen and copy the text rather than

think, question, and speak—building an understanding of the content and applying their learning.

She realised that the issue wasn't just about language. It was about confidence. Students feared making mistakes, and that fear silenced their potential. Additionally, some students struggled due to learning gaps created by financial constraints. They required support beyond regular lessons, but affording additional tuition was out of the question for the families.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

She resolved to provide her students with an encouraging and nurturing environment — one in which they feel confident to share, learn & grow without constraints.

- **Encouraging expression:** She began with icebreakers and reading exercises where students interpreted poems and stories in their own words, even if imperfectly. “It’s better to make mistakes while trying, than stay silent out of fear,” she would tell them.

- **Extending care beyond classrooms:** She visited students’ homes to understand their struggles deeply and support them better. Her visits and patience helped them rebuild confidence and discipline. While for families, it strengthened the belief in the education system and in teachers like her.
- **Building peer support:** She introduced an initiative called, ‘*Each One Teach One*’, where she matched Grade 11 & 12 students with juniors who needed help in English, Mathematics, or Science. Seniors mentored juniors, offering academic help, moral support and encouragement to



express themselves, make mistakes and continue their studies despite financial and social barriers.

- **Removing financial barriers:** She personally paid tuition and exam fees for over 20 students, often with support from her family. This ensured her students were not left behind and that their education continued.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Peleno drew strength and guidance from the Professional Learning Community (PLC) under Nagaland's NECTAR Project, funded by the World Bank. Through regular PLC sessions, she learnt new teaching strategies, exchanged ideas with peers, and built confidence in using digital tools for language learning. Over time, the PLC became more than a learning platform. Today, as the President of the English PLC for Kohima, she helps others shape their students' learning.

Why She Went Beyond

For Peleno, teaching is deeply personal.

That legacy of service drives her. "Education is not about perfection; it's about patience, compassion, and connection," she says. Every time she sees a shy student begin to speak or a struggling learner rediscover confidence, her purpose is renewed.

Impact Her Work Is Creating

The changes are visible and lasting. Students who once feared English now engage freely in class discussions. Dropouts were common initially, but home visits made a meaningful difference—restoring both steady attendance and a renewed enthusiasm for learning. The *Each One Teach One* initiative has nurtured a culture of peer learning — where more than 20 mentors supported 30+ mentees from her school. Mentees found guidance and mentors had the chance to build their leadership skills.

Her efforts have led to remarkable success stories: a student who once paid little attention to studies, pursued a Master's degree in Tenyidie and graduated at the top of her class. Another, who once feared speaking, became the President of his college's student body.

Parents, once distant, now attend meetings —



proud and engaged in their children's education.

Moreover, as the President of the English PLC for Kohima, she facilitates in-person and online spaces, helping peers improve digital skills and teaching practices. Platforms like DIKSHA and ABHYAAS LMS have also allowed her to contribute e-content and share lesson plans that other teachers can adopt.



Her Words

“Listen to students- that is the true strength of a teacher. Connect with them not from a place of authority but as a guide and a friend. They may overshare, they may test your patience, but often, all it takes is a compassionate ear to help them find their way”.

Moturi Mangarani

Designing for Joyful Learning

Who She Is

Moturi Mangarani's story is a powerful reminder that innovation often begins with empathy. Now serving as a Mathematics teacher at a primary public school in Andhra Pradesh, Mangarani has spent over 15 years transforming the way young children learn—making classrooms into spaces of curiosity, creativity, and joy. “Every child learns differently,” she says, “so I must teach everyone differently.”

She was born in a family with a humble background where education was not easily accessible. But her parents deeply valued their daughter’s determination to study. It was her Telugu teacher, Uma Maheswar Rao, who first planted the seed of self-belief with his words – “Even students from government schools can achieve great heights,” guiding her through every stage of her journey. Her path to teaching and shaping young lives was not easy.

Limited resources and space constraints with cramped classrooms made it difficult to introduce play or activity-based learning. But her desire to ensure that no child would ever feel left behind gave her the strength to persist. Over time, she evolved from a hesitant young teacher into a creative force in primary education — an educator who believes that learning must be simple, visual, and joyful.

Today, her school, with eight teachers and over 200 students, has become a hub of energy and experimentation. Classes spill out onto verandas and the Nutri Garden, where students learn about health and nutrition. Laughter fills the air, and lessons often turn into stories, games, and songs in her classroom library — encouraging health, reading, and community involvement.





The Problem She Saw

When Mangarani began her teaching journey, she noticed that many of her students struggled to stay engaged. Traditional methods did not create any interest, especially among younger children. The lack of playgrounds, reading spaces, or any relevant digital tools further widened the learning gap. She also observed that teachers often felt underconfident about adapting lessons for different learners.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Mangarani soon realised that improving learning outcomes for her students meant that they needed learning that was meaningful, engaging, and within their reach. She began creating animated and interactive learning materials in 2012. What started as a small classroom experiment gradually transformed the way not just her students learnt, but students in other schools as well.

- **Digital storytelling:** She turned complex Mathematics lessons into simple, animated explanations and gradually extended these efforts to other subjects.
- **Blending creativity and play:** Using puppetry, AI, digital games, and puzzles, she brought lessons to life, especially in Telugu language education.
- **Building peers' capacity:** To date, she has guided over 10,000 teachers through physical workshops, DIKSHA modules, and one-to-one personalised sessions around enhancing Foundational Literacy and Numeracy skills through activity-based learning and using digital tools and AI to make teaching aids.
- **Peer and teacher networks:** She co-founded a teacher support group that trained 40 teachers in digital tools and later launched *Froots*—a magazine where educators share stories and best practices.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Mangarani's journey was sustained by her peers, community members, and several NRIs who supported her vision. Their contributions

helped her secure books, play equipment, and digital devices for students. She also collaborated with SCERT, the UNICEF team, and other state agencies to design textbooks, adult literacy materials, and teacher training modules — extending her impact far beyond her school.

Why She Went Beyond

Her greatest motivation is her students. "Their curiosity is my fuel," she says. Watching them transform from shy learners into confident speakers, from hesitant problem-solvers into creative thinkers, keeps her energised. She draws constant inspiration from the advice of her mentor, Surya Narayana Sir, who once told her: "Treat every child as your own and give your best, even when no one is watching."

Impact Her Work Is Creating

The results of her work are visible in the school's growing vibrancy and the huge teaching community she has been able to empower with innovative pedagogy. Today, teachers from across India and nearly 100 countries use her content — proof that one

teacher's creativity can ripple across borders. Her community has expanded to over 229,000 subscribers with 80 million views. Through her YouTube lessons, workshops, and PLC engagements, she has trained over 10,000 teachers, helping them embrace digital and creative pedagogy. The community now views her school as a model of innovation and pride.

Attendance and performance have improved dramatically, and students are more confident and participative. One of her students even won a gold medal in sports and is preparing for the Olympics.



Her Words

“Every child has potential- it is our responsibility to find that spark and help it grow. Learning should never feel like a burden; it should feel like discovery. If my work helps a child smile while learning, or inspires a teacher to innovate, then I know I’m walking the right path.”



Ajaya Sahoo

From Myths to Microscopes

Who He Is

Ajaya Sahoo, Senior Teacher at PM SHRI Government High School, Kisinga, Kalahandi, has dedicated over two decades to nurturing young minds in rural Odisha. Starting his teaching career in 2004, he joined Government High School, Madiguda in 2013, where he started working closely with tribal and marginalised Communities.

Hailing from a modest background, Ajaya understands the challenges that first-generation learners face — limited access to resources, lack of exposure, and low parental literacy. His students are no different. They come mostly from Scheduled Tribe (ST), Scheduled Caste (SC), and Below Poverty Line (BPL) families and often juggle school with agricultural or domestic responsibilities.

In addition to teaching, Mr. Sahoo is deeply involved in community initiatives such as



plantation drives, cleanliness campaigns, and student led social work. These efforts have strengthened community awareness around health, hygiene, and environmental care. Parents who once remained disengaged now actively participate in school activities, while children grow up in cleaner, greener

surroundings. His holistic approach to education blends academic excellence with values of service, sustainability, and scientific thinking — making him both a teacher and a changemaker in the truest sense.

The Problem He Saw

When Mr. Sahoo was posted in the tribal belt of Kalahandi, he observed several interlinked challenges hindering students' learning. Many children grew up in environments shaped by myths and superstitions that discouraged scientific inquiry. Parents prioritised labour and agriculture over education, leading to poor attendance and high dropout rates — especially during harvest and migration seasons.

Students viewed Science and Mathematics as difficult and disconnected from their daily lives. With limited access to teaching aids, laboratories, and hands-on learning, abstract concepts became intimidating. Teachers, too, struggled to make these subjects engaging in low-resource settings.

These realities created a cycle of disinterest and underachievement, where students lacked not only resources, but also belief in their own potential.

The Micro-Improvement Journey



Mr. Sahoo believed in the power of taking small, consistent steps. He began implementing simple yet thoughtful changes, which over time transformed both mindsets and learning experiences.

- **Community awareness and mobilisation:** He conducted door-to-door visits to counsel parents on the importance of regular schooling. His consistent engagement gradually built trust, improving attendance and reducing dropout rates.
- **Making scientific inquiry a culture:** He introduced science fairs, exhibitions,

quizzes, and “Science Behind Miracles” sessions that encouraged students to question, explore and reason.

- **STEM Clubs and TLM Corners:** With guidance from Odisha Rising Foundation (ORF), he helped establish STEM clubs and Teaching-Learning Material (TLM) corners, promoting creativity and experimentation.
- **Peers' capacity building:** As a Master Resource Person (MRP) for Mathematics since 2017, he has trained teachers across Kalahandi.

- **Student mentorship:** He mentored high-performing students under the PRAKASH 2024–2025 programme (for support for children with learning gaps), preparing them for state and national-level academic recognition.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

ORF provided Ajaya with the institutional and intellectual support needed to translate ideas into action. ORF's structured approach to micro-improvement projects (MIPs) — focusing on STEM clubs, teacher capacity building, and community engagement — enabled him to align his school-level efforts with district priorities.

Through training workshops at District Institute of Education and Training, Bhawanipatna and collaborative sessions with peer educators, Ajaya co-created localised STEM strategies and curriculum innovations. This partnership ensured that his work was not an isolated act of leadership but part of a sustained, system-level movement towards quality learning in Kalahandi's public schools.

Why He Went Beyond

Having grown up in the same landscape of limited resources and aspirations, he firsthand experienced the power of education to transform lives. This personal connection fuels his unwavering commitment to ensure that no child in rural Kalahandi feels excluded from opportunity because of their background.

He believes that “education must awaken curiosity and conscience at the same time.” His motivation stems from seeing his students think critically, challenge blind beliefs, and take pride in their learning. For him, every lesson is a step toward building a rational, confident, and compassionate generation.

Impact His Work Is Creating

Ajaya's efforts have transformed classrooms in Kalahandi into spaces of curiosity and hands-on learning. Students who once struggled with Science and Mathematics now actively participate in experiments and projects. Over 25 students have represented the school across different competition tiers: two at the national, five at the state, eight at the district, and 11 at the block level.

Attendance has improved, dropouts have decreased, and several students have received recognition at district and state-level competitions, boosting confidence and visibility. His work has also inspired other teachers to adopt experiential teaching methods, while parents and the community have become more engaged in supporting the school.

His initiatives demonstrate that dedicated educators can empower both students and communities, creating lasting educational change. He envisions expanding hands-on science learning to all blocks of Kalahandi — ensuring that every learner discovers the joy of learning by doing.



His Words

“Education must go beyond textbooks. It should nurture curiosity, courage, and compassion. My dream is to see every rural child in Kalahandi holding a microscope with the same pride as holding a plough—because both are tools of creation. Through STEM learning, we can build not only skilled individuals but also thoughtful citizens.”

Rajeev Kumar Yadav

Reclaiming Dignity, Rebuilding Schools, Rekindling Learning

Who He Is

Rajeev Kumar Yadav comes from a humble background from Uttar Pradesh. He grew up in an environment where education was often seen as a luxury rather than a right. He still remembers walking long distances to school and the pride his parents felt each time he progressed to the next class. Those early experiences taught him two simple truths — that education changes how families dream, and that every child deserves a teacher who believes in them.

His career in education began as a teacher, where he quickly earned a reputation for bringing energy and clarity to his classrooms. Over time, his administrative roles gave him a wider view of how systems work — and how they can fail children. “Rules can help you maintain order,” he often says, “but relationships are what create change.”

Rajeev is currently the Block Education Officer (BEO) of Mardah block in Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh. He is deeply curious about people, spending time listening to teachers, walking through classrooms, and sitting with students. His approach to leadership is relational — rooted in empathy, data, and dialogue. “When I visit a school,” he says, “I don’t just look at attendance charts. I ask children what they enjoy learning, and teachers what they struggle with. Only then can we build real solutions.” This mix of empathy and precision became the foundation of Mardah’s turnaround.

The Problem He Saw

When Rajeev arrived in Mardah in July 2022, the numbers spoke of a crisis. In the block’s 365 schools, attendance hovered around 60–65%, and learning outcomes were discouraging.



Although 30–40% of students were recorded as “NIPUN,” classroom observations revealed that many could not apply foundational skills effectively. Infrastructure was deteriorating — only 68% of schools met all 19 Karyakalp parameters such as safe drinking water, functional toilets, classroom furniture, etc. Teachers were demotivated; many felt their work went unnoticed. Parents had begun to lose faith in government schools.

A deeper look exposed the layers beneath the data: poverty, migration, children missing school to care for siblings or work in fields, and the lingering effects of the pandemic. Coordination with gram panchayats (village administration) was weak, and schools operated in isolation.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Rajeev knew that top-down directives would not solve this. What Mardah needed was a local, human-centred approach that started with trust and grew through teamwork. He began by rebuilding morale and clarity. Every

intervention carried two principles — clarity and collaboration.

- **Launching “Hai Master!”:** In August 2022, he launched Hai Master! — an orientation for teachers, political representatives, gram pradhans (village administrative heads), and community members. It was not a typical workshop; but a declaration that teachers would once again be community role models. Conversations revolved around classroom conduct, communication, and professional dignity and pride.
- **Data to dialogue:** He introduced micro-meetings—short, data-driven review sessions where school teams, Academic Resource Persons, and head teachers jointly examined progress. Schools were classified into A, B, and C categories based on attendance, learning outcomes, and classroom practices and action plans were co-created.
- **Ensuring holistic learning:** He reimagined schools as spaces for academics, creativity, and self-discovery. Teachers began career-counselling sessions with students and parents, linking learning to aspirations. Sports camps, girls’ hockey, and hobby clubs made schools more livelier and more inclusive.
- **Creating print-rich learning corners:** Using local materials and small donations, classrooms became vibrant spaces filled with charts, Teaching Learning Materials (TLMs), and children’s work. These corners nurtured curiosity and peer learning.
- **Peer Learning and NIPUN in Action:** Students were grouped into best, average, and weak learners. Stronger students supported peers, while teachers and children co-created TLMs. Songs, rhymes, and storytelling turned rote lessons into joyful learning.
- **“Samvaad se Sankalp tak”:** Teachers and students took learning to the streets — with plays, rallies, and poster campaigns in local dialects — to rebuild trust in



government schools and encourage regular attendance. These efforts transformed villages into learning spaces.

- **Guardians of Attendance:** Teachers began keeping detailed phone registers and made follow-up calls for absentees. Door-to-door visits and parent WhatsApp groups kept communication active. Mothers became strong advocates for regular attendance.
- **Energising annual day and recognition spaces:** He revived Annual Day — once-neglected — into a celebration of learning and local culture. Recognition programmes like *Star of the Week* and *Star of the Month* gave children visible pride.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Mardah's transformation was built through partnerships. Mantra4Change supported the block through training and reflection spaces under Mission Mangal. Exposure to peers and leaders helped Rajeev refine his approach.

He also sought advice from Prof. Harikesh Singh, whose guidance shaped the micro-

meeting culture. The Department of Basic Education provided crucial backing — from motivational visits by officials to posters, community-outreach materials, and gram panchayats supported infrastructure improvements. This collaboration ensured that change was collective, not individual — a lesson he often repeats to his team.

Why He Went Beyond

Rajeev's motivation is rooted in belief — that education is the only inheritance that grows when shared. Having seen the effects of poverty and neglect, he made it his mission to restore dignity to teaching and joy to learning. "I cannot stand seeing a child silent in class," he says. "Every silence hides a question — and our job is to bring it out."

Impact His Work Is Creating

The results in Mardah have been striking, within two years (2023-2025):

- Attendance rose from 60–65% to over 80–82%.
- NIPUN proficiency reached 100%, up from 30–40% based on Nipun Bharat

Monitoring Center' (NBMC) data and internal assessments.

- Category C schools reduced to less than 1%.
- Schools fulfilling all 19 Karyakalp parameters increased from 68% to 98%.

These numbers tell a story of renewed faith. Teachers now take ownership of results; parents regularly attend PTMs; and students display curiosity and confidence unseen before. Infrastructure has improved too — tiled toilets, clean grounds, painted walls, and functional furniture make schools more inviting. Beyond academics, cultural programs and sports have given children new identities as artists, athletes, and leaders.

For two consecutive years, Mardah has been recognised as the "Best Block in NIPUN" in Ghazipur, with the highest student proficiency and attendance in the district.



His Words

“When I joined, schools were quiet, teachers were unsure, and parents were distant. Today, you can hear laughter, see activity, and feel belonging. That’s what real transformation is — when education becomes a shared responsibility.”

Rajesh Kumar

A District Preparing Students for Life

Who He Is

Born into a humble family in Jhajjar, Haryana, Rajesh Kumar completed his early education at a government school in the same district. From a young age, he was deeply committed to learning, even though he often felt uncertain about his future career path. Watching his parents work tirelessly to make ends meet, he was motivated to study harder and build a life of dignity and service.

Rajesh credits his grandfather as his greatest inspiration — the one who taught him that life's true purpose lies not only in personal growth but also in helping others rise. Guided by this belief, he chose the field of education and became the first teacher in his family.

Over the years, he grew steadily within the system with a strong belief in the power of mentorship, holding roles that reflected both competence and compassion — first as a Teacher, then as a Principal, a Block Education



Officer (BEO), and later as Principal of the District Institute of Education & Training (DIET). Each role deepened his understanding of schools, teachers, and students, shaping him into a leader grounded in empathy, discipline and practical experience.

Today, as the District Education Officer (DEO) of Jhajjar, Rajesh oversees academic planning, teacher professional development,

programme implementation, and school administration across the district. His role places him at the heart of systemic change, ensuring that principals, teachers, and students receive the guidance, clarity, and support they need to learn, grow, and thrive. His family, inspired by his journey, now has many members working in the education sector, carrying forward his legacy of service.

The Problem He Saw

When Rajesh took charge as Jhajjar's DEO, the district's secondary students were facing a silent but significant challenge: career confusion. Most students in government schools had limited exposure to career opportunities, college pathways, and skill-based professions. A baseline survey revealed that more than 80% of students lacked clarity about which subjects to choose after Grade 10 or which careers to pursue after Grade 12.

Teachers, too, struggled with this responsibility, often viewing it as an add-on activity rather than an essential part of education. This resulted in inconsistent guidance, leaving students adrift at a crucial stage of decision-making.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Rajesh recognised that to build confidence among students, the entire education ecosystem — principals, teachers, and officials — first had to believe deeply in the purpose. The Pratibha Manthan programme was introduced to bring everyone together.

- **Creating a shared vision:** He began the academic year by engaging with 177 school principals, aligning them on the importance of career guidance and clarifying the teacher nomination process (programme leads in their respective schools).
- **Building teacher ownership:** He personally attended all five block-level teacher trainings with 366 teachers in attendance and motivated them to take full responsibility for implementing the programme in their schools.
- **Empowering block officers:** He held review meetings with BEOs, providing clear directions and appreciating their efforts— building accountability through encouragement, rather than inspection.
- **Connecting with students:** He visited multiple schools, including PM SHRI institutions, interacted with students, identified unique talents, and ensured they were supported through the Pratibha Manthan team.
- **Role model sessions:** These sessions brought students face-to-face with inspiring individuals from their own communities — doctors, officers,



entrepreneurs, school alumni, and artists — who shared real stories of hard work and growth. These interactions helped students see that every big dream begins with small, steady steps.

- **Building confidence with celebration:** The programme created celebratory spaces such as the Vidyaarthi Career Manch, where students presented their learnings, career charts, and creative projects. Selected schools later represented Jhajjar at the District-Level Showcase, where confidence replaced hesitation and curiosity replaced doubt. At these events, Rajesh strengthened the culture of recognition, encouraging students to articulate their aspirations openly.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

The success of Pratibha Manthan — an initiative by the Department of School Education, Jhajjar, aimed at helping students with career guidance — has been a product of collaboration. The Department of School Education and the Alohomora Education Foundation co-implemented the programme,

while the District Administration, led by the Deputy Commissioner, offered institutional and logistical support. Together, these partnerships ensured consistent monitoring, community engagement, and district-wide ownership of the initiative.

Why He Went Beyond

Rajesh's motivation is deeply personal. Having once faced the same uncertainty that his students now navigate, he is determined to ensure that no child feels directionless. He finds immense joy in watching students articulate their dreams with clarity, and teachers describe how career conversations have transformed classroom culture. Recognition at the district and state levels for Pratibha Manthan only strengthens his resolve to make Jhajjar a model for purposeful youth development.

Impact His Work Is Creating

Rajesh often remarked, "We're not just preparing students for exams; we're preparing them for life." With this belief, he placed strong emphasis on the initiative. Under his

leadership, the programme became a district-wide movement for clarity, confidence and celebration. Over 75% of schools hosted these activities with enthusiasm.

Jhajjar's classrooms today echo with clarity. Students can name multiple careers, express their goals confidently, and connect their learning with real possibilities.

The program has significantly influenced students' career choices, encouraging them to explore diverse and skill-oriented pathways. For the first time, students from Jhajjar have enrolled in various skill-based courses outside the district. A girl student from Tumbaheri secured admission to the NavGurukul Institute, Pune; Barhana students joined the GMR Institute in New Delhi and have secured well-paying jobs. Several others are pursuing courses in agriculture.

In total, 28 students have successfully gained admissions, internships, or employment opportunities in different skill-based institutions.

जिला शिक्षा एवं प्रशिक्षण संस्थान माछडौली (झज्जर) (6857)



His Words

"We now have a district where every school knows that career guidance is not optional — it's essential."

Shekhar Nag

Education Reborn in Conflict's Shadow

Who He Is

In the remote forests of Chintalnar in Konta block, Sukma, Chhattisgarh, red-earth roads stretch between scattered tribal hamlets. Here, Shekhar Nag grew up with a life shaped by distance and determination. He comes from a family of six, his parents, two brothers, one sister and himself. His village had no school when he was a child. “There was no teacher, no school building,” he says. “If I wanted to study, I had to leave home.”

And he did. As a young boy, he walked away from home to live and study in an ashram school (residential government schools in Bastar, for children from remote villages), beginning a journey that would later define his purpose.

He grew up and learnt alongside other children who had also left their homes. Through his teachers' support and being away from his

family at such a young age, he built discipline, self-reliance and resilience early in life. His family did not have much, but they supported his decision to study. The school met his basic needs, and his elder brother guided him, motivating him to continue even when it felt difficult. Later, he graduated from Jagdalpur, determined to keep going despite limited resources. “Knowing yourself is the hardest journey,” he says. “But education helped me understand who I am and what I value.”

His biggest inspiration has been his elder brother, who taught him the meaning of discipline and hard work. “He believed I could do something meaningful. That belief became my strength,” Shekhar shares.

Shekhar did not plan to work in education. That changed when his brother told him about Shiksharth, an organisation working to create



positive childhood experiences for children growing up in conflict areas like Bastar, Chhattisgarh — a region deeply impacted by violence for over four decades. He learned about the organisation's work and wanted to help strengthen his community. "I wanted to work for children in my own area. I didn't want any child to go through what I did, leaving home to study," he says.

Today, Shekhar works as a community educator, supporting student learning in reopened schools in Konta. These schools had been silent for years. Conflict, long distances between villages, and the lack of teachers had led to prolonged school closures. Classrooms

remained locked and unused. Children stayed at home and many migrated elsewhere.

Shekhar is now one of the trusted local anchors. He is a bridge: between school and community, between language and understanding, between fear and possibility. Rooted deeply in his Gondi upbringing Shekhar carries a worldview shaped by nature and community. "In our life, the forest, river and land are like family. We respect nature because it supports us," he says. This connection influences how he sees education — not just as books and lessons but as life understood through experience, culture and dignity. Outside studies, Shekhar loves playing cricket and spending time with friends. These

simple joys helps him stay grounded and hopeful.

His dream is simple and honest: "I want to build my own house one day through my hard work. And I want every child in my village to study without fear."



The Problem He Saw

When schools in Sukma began reopening after years of closure, teachers and Shikshadoots like him, would go from house to house, telling parents that children could now study safely in their own villages again.

But Shekhar saw a challenge many overlooked. Reopening a school was not enough. Children had forgotten learning routines. Many were shy or afraid to speak. Some had never experienced joyful learning at all. Parents had lost trust in the system. Teachers were trying, but support was limited. Schools reopened on paper but learning did not return automatically.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Shekhar decided to work on the harder part — rebuilding learning and trust inside reopened schools. He did not bring big programmes. He brought consistency. He brought trust. He brought *presence*.

- **Created safe and welcoming classrooms:** Children were welcomed

warmly on the first day with tilak (forehead mark adorned to welcome guests), classrooms were repainted, and learning restarted through play, songs and stories so that children felt safe to return.

- **Built comfort through mother tongue:** Learning was introduced in Gondi and Halbi, using folk stories and songs so that children could understand easily and speak freely.
- **Made learning interactive:** Local materials like seeds, stones, wood, leaves and bamboo were used to teach numbers, to build small models — making learning simple and connected to children's own world.
- **Organised joyful learning experiences:** Learning camps, sports days and cultural activities were organised to reinforce learning and help students reconnect with school. These involved group games, songs, read-aloud sessions, and simple activities using local materials, helping children slowly rebuild learning habits and confidence after years of disruption.
- **Ensured Continuous Learning:** Daily classroom routines began with a short greeting circle, followed by a story or song

in Gondi, small group activities using local materials, and simple written practice. This rhythm helped children feel safe, settle in, and learn consistently every day.

His approach was simple - show up, stay consistent, and build trust slowly. "Every small step helps because change takes time," he says.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Shekhar says he learned by being part of a supportive team. Through Shiksharth, he gained exposure to classroom management and teaching strategies, child safety practices, and reflective learning. "I got guidance whenever I faced a problem. The team helped me grow," he says. His journey is not individual, it is collaborative, shaped by learning together with other educators, teachers and community members.

Why He Went Beyond

This work is personal for Shekhar. He knows what it means to study against odds. He understands why a child may lose hope. And he also knows that hope can return.





“Education changed my life. If I can help even one child to stay connected to learning, that is enough for me,” he says. One of his proudest moments was going to Delhi for a team step-back to speak about his work (it is an internal reflection space where our team meets once or twice a year to reflect on our achievements, align our purpose and strengthen our work). “People listened to the voice of Sukma with respect. That gave me courage,” he remembers.

Impact His Work Is Creating

In fragile regions, impact is not always measured in numbers. It is measured in trust, continuity and quiet change. Today, Shekhar supports 25 schools reaching around 900 children.

Children who once hesitated now speak and participate in class. Attendance improved as classrooms became joyful. Parents began trusting schools again. Teachers found support and partnership. Reopened schools continue to stay active and functional. Slowly, a culture of learning has begun to return.



His Words

“Education should respect local language, culture and life. Here, children learn from forests, rivers, festivals and stories. Books are important, but learning from life is equally important. If children feel safe and valued, they will learn. My wish is simple that children here get the chance to study with dignity. That is all.”

Rakesh Sharma

One Principal's Vision, A State's Inspiration



Who He Is

Rakesh Sharma is the Principal at Shaheed Gurdas Ram Memorial Government Girls Sr. Sec. School, located in Zira, Ferozepur, Punjab. The premier institution is sought after not just in the Ferozepur, but in the adjoining districts of Faridkot and Moga. It boasts a large student strength of 2,200 from Grades K-12, out of which 743 students have voluntarily transferred from private schools.

Over the years, Rakesh has built a very strong continuous improvement, rigour and service culture within the school team. This, coupled with an envious school infrastructure, targeted teacher development, deep community engagement and opportunities for student leadership, have significantly shifted learning outcomes across the board. With each passing year, more outperform their peers in the private schools — both academically and in co-curricular activities — at the district, state,

national and global levels.

This is his third school where Rakesh has served as the Principal. Having enjoyed teaching during his own high school years, Rakesh decided to become a teacher — and eventually took up the role of a Headmaster to drive change on his own terms. Every single day, he works single mindedly towards school transformation and facilitating student achievement.

For years, he has provided coaching, mentoring, and opened avenues for financial support to help his students pursue education and build lives of their own choosing — lives not dictated by economic background. Today, 512 of his former students are educators. Every district and every block in Punjab has a teacher or headmaster who was once taught by him.

The Problem He Saw

Rakesh was a meritorious student, yet he never received recognition even when he excelled in school. He wanted to ensure that his students never experience the same indifference from the teachers. He wanted both students and their parents to be celebrated.

In 2019, when Rakesh joined the school, he discovered that it was established in 1883. Once a well-recognised institution, the school had deteriorated over the decades. The buildings were crumbling, community engagement was virtually non-existent, and teacher motivation — along with academic results — was low.

Within the school and the wider community, nobody believed that students from Punjabi-medium school could excel like their English-medium peers. This stereotype deeply affected students' self-belief and motivation. Unsurprisingly, over the past 12 years, not a single student from the school had made it to the merit list.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Rakesh sought to change this narrative and promised to his students that as a reward for achieving merit, he would fulfill whatever their wishes were.

- **Introducing 'Flight Trip' as the reward:** Students expressed their desire to get a 'jahaaz da jhoota' (travel by air). It was a significant reward, as more than 85% students in the school come from underprivileged families. To celebrate and inspire excellence, Rakesh promised to organise a flight trip for meritorious students, covering all expenses himself.
- **Motivating teachers:** He engaged teachers in reflective conversations, helping them understand the value of setting high expectations for their students, supporting the children in the process and thereby building community's trust in the school.





- **Goal setting with students:** Students signed up for the challenge, and Rakesh met with these students regularly. He helped them set personal learning goals, and emphasised the importance of hard work, education and pursuing higher studies through consistent achievement.
- **Building teacher capacity:** Rakesh facilitated teacher development through classroom observations, regular training and mentoring sessions to ensure effective learning in every classroom.
- **Creating learning groups:** Learning groups were formed for high potential students to foster teacher and peer support to ensure continuous motivation and collaboration.
- **Providing Continuous Counselling:** To help students remain focused despite personal or external challenges, the school team extended emotional, financial and even medical support wherever needed.

Why He Went Beyond

For Rakesh, student achievement is his north star. Once, his teacher and mentors, T. R. Sharma, rebuked him for calling to share his own academic achievements — Rakesh is a seven time gold medalist and holds an honorary PhD. His mentor encouraged him to stop chasing personal growth and focus instead on his students. Additionally, the respect and affection he receives from his students keeps him going.



Impact His Work Is Creating

In 2021, four students from the school were meritorious. In the past four years, a total of 28 students have taken the *jahaaz da jhoota*, with their trips sponsored by Rakesh himself.

The students continue to set the bar high for their peers by securing scholarships. Over the years, 36 students have secured NMMS (National Means Cum-Merit Scholarship), 45 have cleared PSTSE (Punjab State Talent Search Examination) and 193 have been awarded Chief Minister's merit based scholarships. Several of these meritorious students are pursuing higher education at prestigious universities in Delhi and across Punjab, with their education sponsored by school and local businessmen and groups wherever needed.

Recently, a student from the school who secured fourth rank in Grade 10 exams in Punjab state was invited to Chief Minister's residence for felicitation. The Principals were invited as well, and Rakesh attended. When the Chief Minister learned that the student's motivation to achieve merit was the flight trip -



the reward introduced by Rakesh — and that he had personally borne the cost — he was moved. The student had already flown in Grade 8 upon achieving merit and now she was going to do it the second time. He announced

that, henceforth, all top-performing students in the state would go on educational tours by air to premier institutes of the country, inspired by the Zira school's model.

SGRM. GOVT. GIRLS. SR. SEC.
SMART SCHOOL, ZIRA (FZR.)
Punjab State Merit Holder
& National Level
IYIC Winner

Merit



ਸ਼੍ਰੀ ਹਰੇਸ਼ ਕਟਾਰੀਆ
ਐਮ. ਐਲ. ਏ

ਸ਼੍ਰੀ ਹਰੇਸ਼ ਕਟਾਰੀਆ
ਐਮ. ਐਲ. ਏ

ਮੁੱਖ ਮਹਿਸੂਲ

ਸ਼੍ਰੀ ਹਰੇਸ਼ ਕਟਾਰੀਆ

ਐਮ. ਐਲ. ਏ



ਵਿਸ਼ਵ ਮਹਿਸੂਲ

ਸ. ਚਮਕੌਰ ਸਿੰਘ

ਚਿਲ੍ਹਾ ਸਿੱਖਿਆ ਅਫਸਰ ਸੈਕੰਡਰੀ

ਕਾਨੂੰਨ ਅਤੇ ਵਿਕਾਸ ਸੈਕੰਡਰੀ ਸਮਾਰਟ ਸਕੂਲ



His Words

"I am a government servant and I am performing my duty which is to treat every student equally, with respect. When my students realise their dreams, I know I have done a good job. In my role as the Principal, I am glad I have been able to make this possible."

Hetalben Tadavi

Reimagining Early Education Through Play



Who She Is

Hetalben Tadavi's journey began in a small village in the Bardoli Block of Chhota Udepur district, Gujarat. Growing up, she was deeply inspired by her mother, a teacher who shaped lives with patience and compassion. A seed was sown in young Hetalben's heart — she saw education not just as a career path, but as a means to bring hope, joy, and stability — both

to her own life and to the lives of others.

Hetalben began her career as a helper teacher at a Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) school in 2007. Today, she serves as a Pre-School Education Instructor (PSEI) with the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in Vadodara Urban, Gujarat. For the past three years, she has been supporting 103 Anganwadi

centres, guiding teachers, and nurturing joyful, play-based classrooms for young learners. She firmly believes that children learn best through play, and her work reflects that belief every day — through the laughter, songs, and stories that fill the learning spaces she helps create.

The Problem She Saw

She has been working with the ICDS department since 2021. During her visits to Anganwadi centres, Hetalben noticed something that deeply troubled her. Children are meant to have a 30-minute indoor play session each day using four distinct learning corners. However, almost 40% of Anganwadi teachers had not set up the corners at all, while others had the materials locked away in cupboards. In some centres, the sessions were irregular or skipped entirely due to the lack of materials.

For Hetalben, this issue was more than just a gap in implementation — it was deeply personal. Growing up in a small village, she herself never had access to toys, learning materials, or playful spaces to explore her curiosity. Even when her own children were young, such opportunities were few and far between.

As weeks passed, she found out that many teachers lacked training and confidence, unsure how to organise play sessions or use materials creatively. Some centres had limited

space or insufficient resources, making it difficult to set up proper corners. Over time, this led to low participation among children and less enthusiasm from teachers.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Working alongside NSS, Hetalben decided to turn the missed opportunity into a joyful, play-based learning experience for hundreds of children.

- **Building teachers' understanding:** She demonstrated to teachers what each of the four learning corners represented, the types of materials to be used, and how children benefit from play-based exploration.
- **Enhancing the language corner:** She guided teachers to enrich the corner with books, puppets, flashcards, and word puzzles, which aid in developing early literacy skills interactively and playfully. Several teachers were initially shy and hesitant to use the learning materials, fearing damage. Through one-on-one interactions, consistent encouragement,
- **Enriching the doll corner:** She introduced creative role-play setups linked to real-life experiences, such as vegetable shops, clothing stores, and kitchens, linking them to the ICDS monthly themes.
- **Message reinforcement:** Hetalben consistently reinforced the idea of “Four Learning Play Time” through ICDS WhatsApp groups. She regularly followed up with Anganwadi workers and collected pictures of children engaging in creative play—building with blocks, exploring community helper roles with doctor sets, both girls and boys making dishes



Hetalben gradually helped shift their mindset. These teachers now confidently use different materials, nurturing student learning.

using kitchen sets, and enjoying storybooks in reading corners. These efforts also helped her monitor implementation and celebrate children's joyful learning progress.

- **Community involvement:** She encouraged teachers to connect with parents and collect toy donations, enriching the learning corners, alongside building a sense of ownership and participation among the community.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

NSS supported Hetalben by helping her understand the problem and shaping it into a solution. The team guided her in planning, making optimal use of resources, and

involving the community, enabling local families and stakeholders to contribute to the creation of effective learning corners. Hetalben, NSS, and the community collaborated to implement the learning corners successfully.

Why She Went Beyond

What drives Hetalben is her deep love for children and her commitment to giving them opportunities she knows can transform lives. She often reflects on the children she teaches, imagining the possibilities they can achieve with the right support. Inspired by mentors from NSS, she has mastered not just the teaching techniques but also the importance of nurturing curiosity, confidence, and joy in learning.





Impact Her Work Is Creating

Through this journey, teachers across 80% centres (~86) have grown more confident, children more curious and participative, and parents more involved — together weaving a community where learning is joyful, meaningful, and shared.

Teachers now understand not just what children are doing, but why, gaining clarity on the learning approach behind each activity. They conduct regular play sessions of 20–30 minutes, enabling them to observe and assess development across social, emotional, cognitive, and language domains.

Children, once quiet and hesitant, are now curious, energetic, and eager to participate in every activity. Their laughter and excitement echo through the classrooms as they explore materials, experiment during play, and collaborate with their peers — showing a genuine love for learning.

Observing children during play has become easier for teachers, allowing them to fill in the “Mari Vikas Yatra” forms (an assessment book to assess the developmental progress of children between 3 to 6 years in Gujarat state) with confidence and accuracy.

This data, entered into the system, generates reports that provide a clear picture of a child’s learning journey, helping to further improve pre-school education in Anganwadi centers.

Parents share moments of joy, recounting how their children excitedly talk about the games, stories, and hands-on activities they engage in at the centres. This has fostered stronger engagement between families and the learning process, creating a supportive circle around the children’s development.





Her Words

"I feel proud of what we've achieved so far — around 80% of my goal! Today, 86 out of 103 Anganwadi centres conduct effective play sessions. But the journey doesn't end here. I believe that small, consistent efforts can create big change. I want to continue improving classrooms, helping children learn better, and supporting teachers to make learning joyful and meaningful."

John Khangnyu

Lighting the Learning Path

Who He Is

Born in 1986 in a remote corner of Nagaland, John Khangnyu grew up amidst conflict and hardship. When tribal tensions tore through his village, his family lost everything and took refuge in the jungle. Both his parents were deaf and mute. John and his three siblings were raised by their grandparents, who gave them love and built their resilience in the face of adversity.

His journey in education began in a small government school. Later, when his family could no longer afford his studies, a kind mentor stepped forward to support his education — an act of compassion that shaped John's life purpose. He decided to dedicate his life to giving others the same chance he received.

Today, as the School-in-Charge of the Government Primary School in Shinnyu village,

Mon district, John leads with humility and deep commitment. In his tenth year of service, he manages a school of 73 students and three teachers, nurturing learning in one of the most inaccessible parts of the state.

The Problem He Saw

When John first arrived in Shinnyu village, he faced a harsh reality: the school and the community were trapped in darkness—both literally and figuratively. The village lacked basic infrastructure. There were no proper roads, no electricity, no network access, and classrooms were in poor condition.

The absence of electricity meant no lighting for studying after sunset, limited or no use of digital learning tools, and no power to operate school. Parents, preoccupied with survival and uneducated themselves, could not prioritise



education. They often kept children at home or in the fields. With no mobile network or connectivity, the lack of infrastructure left the community isolated, preventing access to educational resources, healthcare, and development opportunities.



The Micro-Improvement Journey

John realised that addressing these infrastructural gaps was the first step towards creating a functional school and an empowered community.

- **Raising awareness:** John documented the village's hardships, lack of electricity, and poor school facilities, which left



children disengaged and wandering aimlessly. He shared these stories on social media, which attracted public attention and motivated individuals and institutions to extend their support.

- **Engaging authorities and NGOs:** He reached out to the district administration and organisations like the Global Himalayan Expedition (GHE) to secure approvals, resources, and technical assistance for electrifying the village.
- **Mobilising the community:** John involved villagers in transporting solar panels up the mountains, housing engineers, and assisting with installations — making them active participants in the project.
- **Electrifying the village:** Solar power was installed in 60 homes, the school, community hall, and church, providing the first-ever reliable electricity connection, enabling digital learning in the school.
- **Enhancing learning environment with technology:** With electricity in place, John used laptops, speakers, and other digital tools to enrich the learning environment.

- **Introducing life skills:** John also held regular parent meetings and introduced practical skills such as bamboo handicrafts to enhance both learning and self-reliance among students.



The journey demanded endurance. John trekked up the mountains over ten times to capture photographs and collect coordinates. He submitted applications and requests to the authorities with detailed requirements. Transporting solar materials that were sent by GHE from Delhi to such a remote village tested everyone's strength and spirit. Rains turned the roads to mud, vehicles broke down, and every step forward required community effort. Yet, every challenge only brought people closer. "When we carried those panels together, we weren't just bringing electricity," John says. "We were instilling the belief that every village deserves progress."

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

The success of Shinnyu's electrification rests on partnerships. GHE provided solar technology and the district administration ensured the requisite permissions and guidance. John's network of friends and well-wishers raised awareness and support through social media. The village community's unity and willingness to contribute made the transformation sustainable — one owned and led by them.

Why He Went Beyond

John's motivation comes from his own life. Having received help when he needed it most, he feels an unshakeable responsibility to give back. "Someone once changed my life with kindness," he says. "Now it's my turn to do the same for others." His mentor's faith and empathy continue to guide his leadership.

Impact His Work Is Creating

Electricity has changed everything in Shinnyu. The school now has solar-powered lighting, laptops, and speakers. Children actively engage in learning, use digital tools, and attend school regularly. Parents also attend PTMs and engage with the school more often, proud of the change they see in their children.

Evenings in the village have transformed — families cook, study, and socialise after sunset. John continues to meet parents weekly, encouraging home-based learning practices. The initiative also inspired further improvements: the school building, once in ruins, is now being rebuilt with funds from Samagra Shiksha, making the learning environment safer and more vibrant.

His Words

“Our responsibility should not remain within four walls. Whether big or small, every act of change must come from love. When we work with compassion, we not only brighten lives- we light up entire communities.”

Text



Kshama Shankar Pandey

Building Trust, One School at a Time

Who He Is

When Kshama Shankar Pandey took charge as the Block Education Officer (BEO) of Kaurihar-I in Prayagraj in September 2023, he knew he wasn't stepping into an unfamiliar landscape. Kaurihar is home for him, a place where he recognises each story from every dusty lane and crowded market. That deep familiarity became his biggest strength in the months that followed.

His journey into education leadership was not accidental. Coming from a modest background, he often recalls how the teachers of his own childhood shaped his sense of purpose.

Before his posting in Kaurihar, he had worked in different educational set-ups where he saw how disconnected administrative systems often were from classroom realities. This experience shaped his approach: to treat every policy as a human story, not just a report.

Outside work, Kshama is quiet, observant, and fond of local stories and simple innovations. He enjoys visiting schools unannounced, watching how teachers improvise with what they have — a bottle turned into a water-cycle model or a hand-drawn chart pinned to the wall. “Those small acts of creativity,” he says, “tell me more about the teacher’s intent than any form or report can.”

In his daily routine, he spends time visiting schools, interacting with teachers, and talking to parents during morning assemblies or after classes. For him, education leadership is not about monitoring but about presence — showing up consistently, listening patiently, and helping others believe that change is possible.

The Problem He Saw

When he joined, the data was worrying. Kaurihar has 266 government schools serving nearly six lakh families. Attendance in most



schools was between 40–50%. Learning levels were uneven. NIPUN (foundational literacy and numeracy) assessment data and teacher observations confirmed that many children lacked basic reading and numeracy skills.

Field visits made the problem clearer. Many parents, especially those from economically weaker families, did not fully understand the importance of regular attendance. Seasonal migration, household chores, and a belief that private schools are ‘better’ further reduced enrolment. “I met a mother who told me, ‘Hamare yahan toh bachche kheton mein madad karte hain, school ka samay milta nahi,’ Kshama recalls. (‘Here, children help in the fields, they don’t get time for school’). “That day I realised — before we bring children to school, we must bring parents into the conversation.”

Families were unsure if schools could deliver real learning, and teachers, in turn, felt demotivated seeing empty benches. The challenges here were about belief— belief in government schools and in the idea that learning can happen anywhere if children are given the right environment.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Kshama’s approach was simple but deeply human — to make learning visible, joyful, and accountable. He started with what he called “visible attendance systems.”

- **Making attendance visible and joyful:** He introduced a low-cost matchbox innovation — green for present and red for absent, placed beside each student’s name. Teachers and children updated it together every morning. For pre-primary children, he added a small button near the door that played a cheerful tune when pressed, making arrival feel celebratory.
- **Strengthening follow-up and parent communication:** He created a clear follow-up system for absentees — a phone call after two days of absence and a home visit if the child stayed away longer. Each school compiled a verified list of parents’ contact numbers to ensure direct and personal communication. Instead of scolding, teachers asked parents what was preventing attendance, opening the door to honest dialogue.

- **Connecting attendance to learning outcomes:** Teachers were encouraged to maintain student-level data on Google Forms fortnightly, categorising children as NIPUN, Near NIPUN, or Not NIPUN. This helped identify who needed focused support and allowed teachers to track progress in real time.
- **Expanding children’s aspirations:** He introduced career charts in classrooms to broaden children’s imagination with pictures of different professions, allowing children to see possibilities beyond farming or small shops.
- **Improving study habits at home:** Parents were given a simple homework timetable (5–9 pm) to ensure children had dedicated study time and a routine that supported learning.



- **Celebrating progress and building motivation:** Recognition was used as a tool for motivation. Kshama set up a “Selfie Point” for children who achieved NIPUN status, along with star certificates, graduation ceremonies, and small public displays of progress, encouraging parents to re-engage with schools.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Kshama’s efforts were strengthened by collaboration with Mantra4Change through the Mission Mangal initiative and a capacity-building workshop in Lucknow. State-provided tools like the Sandarshika and teacher diaries supported teachers in aligning lesson plans and documenting student progress.

Each school was given a small grant of about ₹500 to prepare printed career charts and other learning materials.

Why He Went Beyond

For Kshama, education leadership is not a posting; it’s a personal responsibility.

He often says, “If I do not visit schools, if I do not talk to teachers and children, I start feeling restless.”

His motivation comes from seeing transformation up close — a child reading fluently for the first time or a teacher proudly showing a handmade TLM. “I know how much potential our children have,” he says. “They just need someone to believe in them.” He believes that a school’s strength lies in relationships — between teachers, children, and parents. That belief drives his daily discipline — to show up, listen, and stay consistent. “If we build trust,” he says, “learning will follow.”

Impact His Work Is Creating

The impact in Kaurihar has been remarkable. Within months, attendance rose from around 40–50% to more than 85%. Parents began to see schools as spaces of pride rather than obligation. The block’s NIPUN status jumped from 54% to 81.25%, an increase of 27.25 percentage points — nearly a 50% improvement from the baseline.

Teachers report better classroom engagement and greater confidence in using data for planning. Parents, too, have begun playing an active role. Many started attending *Shiksha Chaupals* (community gatherings) in their villages, sharing how their children now read and write with more ease.

As he looks ahead, Kshama’s focus is clear. Sustaining attendance and learning outcomes requires continuity, not campaigns. He plans to introduce academic competitions between schools, including private ones, so that government school children gain confidence in larger spaces.

He also wants every school to maintain individual student learning portfolios — simple files tracking progress through the year.





His Words

“When parents see progress with their own eyes, trust grows — and with trust, everything else follows. Our job is not just to run schools but to make them spaces where children are curious and parents feel proud. When that happens, education stops being a duty and becomes a shared dream.”



Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

Shyamdev Yadav

Turning a Failing School Around

Who He Is

Shyamdev Yadav is the Principal of Edla Middle School (EMS), located in one of the remotest villages — Edla in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand. He grew up in the same village where he now leads the school. His journey from being a student of Edla Middle School to becoming its Principal reflects his lifelong bond with education and community.

Shyamdev's drive stems from his belief that every child deserves equal opportunity to learn. Having grown up in a marginalised community, he knows the power of education to transform lives. He wants his students to dream beyond their circumstances and to see school as a pathway to dignity and progress.

During his Bachelor of Education studies, his passion for teaching deepened when he discovered how learning methods could shape

young minds. A teacher named Mr. Tiwari also deeply influenced him — his empathy and ability to connect with his students taught Shyamdev that good teaching begins with understanding children, their backgrounds and their families.

He became Principal in 2016. On his very first day, he set a clear goal: to make his school one of the best in the district. School and children are his life. Even beyond working hours, he enjoys spending time with students, promoting sports, and encouraging creative activities that build confidence. As Principal, he leads by example — hands-on, consistent, and deeply invested in every aspect of student life.

The Problem He Saw

When Shyamdev took charge, EMS was in poor condition. The building had no boundary wall, classrooms were unkempt, and the school grounds were often littered with cow dung. Attendance was low — only about 65 of 145 students attended regularly. Many classrooms remained empty.

Most parents, mostly daily wage labourers, were indifferent to schooling because they had little or no formal education themselves. Their priority was daily survival, not long-term learning.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

He realised that without community trust, no academic effort would last. To rebuild that trust, Shyamdev started by directly engaging with the community, improving infrastructure, and enhancing teaching and learning practices.

- Connecting with the community:** Shyamdev & team began door-to-door visits, explaining the value of education.

They surveyed nearby villages and identified nearly 200 out-of-school children.

- Parent Teacher Meetings:** He introduced parent-teacher meetings — an uncommon practice at that time. On Sundays, he organised community gatherings to discuss the importance of schooling and children's future readiness. These sessions were self-funded.
- Sports as an entry point:** He then focused on engaging children, dedicating the first few lessons to games like Kabaddi and Pitthu (Seven Stones). This drew students to school, making it easier to integrate academics later. Over time, other sports were introduced through the *Khelo Jharkhand* sports events, where students earned recognition.
- Residential facilities:** To support working parents, Shyamdev collaborated with the education department to convert the school into a residential one. Two upper classrooms were transformed into dormitories.
- Skill-based learning:** He introduced skill courses like sewing and beautician training for older students. He also established a



small plant nursery to nurture a love for nature and facilitate hands-on learning.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Shyamdev proactively reached out to NGOs and corporate CSR programmes for support. With assistance from ONGC, and NGOs such as Thanal and Sampark, the school set up four smart classrooms and well-equipped science and computer laboratories. Students now confidently operate the equipment themselves.

The collaboration also brought Breakthrough's life skills programme, which helped students



become more confident and expressive. It also enabled open discussions on menstruation, improving girls' comfort and attendance. These partnerships strengthened the school's foundation for inclusive learning.

Impact His Work Is Creating

Within a year, enrolment has quadrupled, and daily attendance remained high. The number of students at EMS has grown from 145 to over 600. The once-neglected school now has

clean classrooms, vibrant learning spaces and functional science and computer labs. The school has become a source of pride for the community. Parents who once ignored education now take active interest in their children's learning. One of Shyamdev's students, Sandeep Kumar Bhuyian, the son of a daily wage earner at a brick kiln, is now pursuing post-graduation studies. He is the first in his family to do so.

Child labour was once prevalent in the community, and Sandeep too might have been lost to it, had Shyamdev not personally convinced his reluctant parents to send him to school.

Today, EMS students outperform their private school peers in academics and sports. Some of them are today studying at Navodaya Vidyalaya and Netarhat Residential School. The transformation has inspired nearby schools to adopt similar practices.



His Words

“Koshish karney walo ki kabhi haar nahi hoti (Those who keep trying never loose). For me, the greatest reward is seeing my students succeed. From next year, Edla Middle School will be upgraded to a high school and my next goal is to make it an Adarsh Vidyalaya - a model of quality and inclusion.”



Tarkeshwar Thakur

Learning Without Fear, Learning With Fun



Who He Is

Tarkeshwar Thakur grew up in a small village in Bihar's Banka district, in Shambhuganj block. From childhood, he carried a dream of becoming a teacher. His father was a respected schoolteacher, and watching him, young Tarkeshwar realised early on that a teacher is not just someone who delivers lessons; they are someone who shapes futures.

As a student, he admired his teachers — their influence left a deep mark on him. He promised himself: "One day, I too will guide children, not just through textbooks, but through life."

Outside of the classroom, Tarkeshwar enjoys puzzles, math games, and tinkering with small objects that are often discarded. These interests continue to shape his teaching style, where he leans on creativity and play to engage children.

Today, he teaches Mathematics and Science at Utkramit Madhya Vidyalaya, Letawaran, in Banka, Bihar. More than a decade into government service as a teacher, he realises that teaching in a rural setting is never just about lessons — he serves as a mentor, motivator, and often a community mobiliser.



The Problem He Saw

As a teacher, one of the biggest challenges for Tarkeshwar has been removing the fear of Science and Mathematics from students. “The way Science and Math have been taught traditionally — without any innovation in pedagogy — students have no choice but to memorise and focus only on exam outcomes,” he says.

For him, learning goes beyond rote memorisation; it is about understanding concepts and applying them. But the application requires breaking concepts down into very simple forms, which in turn demands resources — ones that neither the school possesses nor the children from government schools can afford. This lack of support makes students lose interest, widens learning gaps, and pushes them further away from enjoying these subjects.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

In order to build students’ interest and enhance their learning, Tarkeshwar began implementing Project-Based Learning (PBL) in his classroom.

- **Finding and using locally available material:** Instead of abstract equations, he uses sticks, leaves, clay, and discarded items to demonstrate concepts.
- **Introducing games:** He introduced games like Math Bingo (for multiplication tables), Number Hopscotch (for place value and addition), and Science Quiz Relay (for recalling scientific terms and units). These games make learning fun, engaging, and less intimidating for students.
- **Encouraging collaboration:** He facilitated group work among peers to help each other with projects, build communication, collaboration and problem solving skills.
- **Introducing experiments:** Students conducted frequent experiments such as making a mini water cycle in a jar to understand evaporation and condensation, or using a ball and ruler to measure force and motion. These hands-on activities connect theory to real-life experience.
- **“Our Machines, Our World” Project:** Students created working models of simple and complex machines using local materials, demonstrating their learning. These projects are showcased annually, where the pride on their faces shows how science has left the textbooks and entered their hands.



Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Tarkeshwar found strength in the state's Project-Based Learning programme. Training sessions, peer networks, and handbooks from the State Council of Educational Research and Training gave him structure and confidence. He continues to build on that support, adding his own creative touch and tailoring lessons to the realities of a rural classroom.

Why He Went Beyond

For Tarkeshwar, teaching was never just a duty. His childhood dream — to follow the path of his father and his gurus — keeps him anchored. He believes that if even one child is looking at science with wonder instead of fear, his work is worthwhile. His conviction that “education is the strongest form of social service” drives him to innovate, even when resources are thin.

Impact His Work Is Creating

The changes are visible. Students who once avoided Math and Science are now approaching these subjects with enthusiasm. They ask questions, work in groups, and apply concepts in real life.

One of his students, Sahil Kumar, built a project on environmental conservation that was selected for the INSPIRE Awards programme of the Government of India. This recognition brought pride not just to Sahil but to the entire school and community. Parents who were once distant are now attending meetings, excited to see their children's creativity. Exhibitions and science fairs are continuing to turn classrooms into spaces of discovery and confidence.





His Words

"This is not just a job for me; it is my life's mission. Every day I step into class, I see young faces filled with questions and dreams. If my work helps even one child turn fear into confidence, or one family see education as a source of hope, then I know I am on the right path. Education is not stopping at classrooms, it is transforming entire communities."

Stories of Leaders Outside the Formal Education System (Community):

Grassroots leaders making a tangible impact in underserved communities

"It takes a village to raise a child" is one of the sayings that drives the Shikshagraha movement. Communities are an important component of this village. When communities — parents, youth, and local leaders — are equipped and engaged to participate meaningfully with children's learning, schools shift from simply being a service delivered to families, into spaces of possibilities shaped by them.

Women are more than capable of leading and driving change in the very systems they sustain. And schools are an apt space for youth

development. The micro-improvement projects both undertake in and around public schools contribute significantly to students building 21st-century skills and being ready for work and life.

Out-of-school children are back to classrooms. Families have received support for the documentation necessary for enrollment. Students have built reading habits. Awareness about scholarship programs has ensured continued education for children. Families feel confident choosing government schools. These

instances are a result of women and youth leadership, which is central to the public school transformation we seek.

The stories that follow are a reminder of what becomes possible — when spaces for civic dialogue are nurtured, when marginalised voices are at the frontlines of leadership and storytelling, when collective action is mobilised. They show that both the system and children have much to gain when education becomes a public agenda.

Rajmuni Devi

Restoring Dignity through Girls' Education

Who She Is

Married at thirteen while still in Grade 6, Rajmuni Devi could have become another statistic of child marriage in rural Bihar. Instead, she charted her own path. After five years in her parents' home — a period known as 'gavna' — she moved to her husband's house at seventeen. With the support and encouragement of her father-in-law, she completed her Grade 12 exams while managing household duties. Now a mother of four, Rajmuni has passed on that commitment to education — all three daughters have completed their BA finals, and her son, a graduate, works with Bandhan Bank.

Her professional journey began in 1995 when she taught literacy to 25 women at home. Later she joined Bihar Mahila Samakhya, where she worked on the post of 'Sahyogini' (Facilitator) for women's rights across ten villages. She soon rose to become a Cluster Resource Person and

trainer. When the programme ended in 2014, she continued independently, later partnering with Nirantar organisation during the pandemic to support women in Mahadalit bastis. Today, she serves as District Coordinator with Mantra4Change, leading the Shiksha Chaupal initiative (localised spaces for dialogue and collaboration, which bring together women to identify and dismantle socio-cultural barriers to education and co-create solutions).



In 2012, Rajmuni and her peers founded Deepmala Sanstha and launched Nari Adalats — women's courts that continue to this day, run entirely by volunteers. "Our gatherings and Adalat work have never stopped," she says with pride.

The Problem She Saw

In the remote Mahadalit bastis (settlements of the most marginalised communities) of Bihar's Kaimur district—particularly among the Musahar communities—Rajmuni saw a pattern that weighed heavily on her conscience. Girls were pulled out of school to cook at home; families saw education as either a luxury or a risk. “You want us to educate our daughters,” parents would ask, “but if something (like elopement or assault) happens to them, will you take responsibility?”

Dropout rates were alarming. Many girls disappeared from classrooms, trapped in domestic work, early marriage, or the burden of poverty and low expectations. Some quit after failing exams, too ashamed to return; others were withdrawn by protective fathers.

The neglect was systemic. Most families were unaware of government schemes offering free food, books, sanitary pads, or financial aid of ₹25,000 after Grade 12 and ₹50,000 after graduation. The benefits existed — but the information never reached those who needed it.

Beneath it all lay a deeper question that drove Rajmuni: “How can I help restore the dignity and power denied to them? How can they claim the equality that should have always been theirs?”

The Micro-Improvement Journey

When Rajmuni saw girls dropping out of school due to family pressure and social barriers, she knew awareness alone wouldn't suffice. She facilitated Shiksha Chaupal. Rajmuni personally followed up with girls, their families, and schools until change happened.

- **Creating safe learning spaces:** Rajmuni helped set up Chaupals where girls learned about education through songs and stories, building confidence in a familiar, cultural setting.
- **System-level engagement:** She brought education officers and district officials to the Chaupals, turning them into allies for girls' education.
- **Mentorship and motivation:** Rajmuni provided continuous follow-up and emotional support to girls, refusing to

ave them once they are committed to studying. She worked with headmasters to ensure necessary documentation for enrolment, met with district education officials, and repeatedly visited families to encourage re-enrolment. When Rinki Kumari failed her exams and lost confidence, Rajmuni counselled her: “Do wrestlers stop fighting after one defeat? They fight again.” She ensured Rinki didn't lose hope.

- **Direct intervention:** Rajmuni actively coordinated with education officials at multiple levels to remove barriers for dropout girls. She meets with District Project Officers, district education officers, block coordinators, and school administrators to advocate for individual students. When a student Savita Kumari wanted to return to school after dropping out in Grade 8, Rajmuni personally visited the headmaster to secure her transfer certificate and facilitated the admission.
- **Using technology for continuity:** When she couldn't attend in person, Rajmuni mentored other facilitators and guided sessions through video calls, ensuring no girl was left behind.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Her long association with Bihar Mahila Samakhya provided training, resources, and a platform to work across six key committees — education, health and hygiene, panchayati raj (village administration), economic empowerment, violence and law, and federation building.

Mantra4Change has provided her formal structure and support as District Coordinator. Shiksha Chaupal offered a replicable model for community-led education transformation. These organisations strengthened it, providing the scaffolding for her leadership to flourish.

Why She Went Beyond

Rajmuni's motivation is deeply personal and rooted in justice. She regularly asks families, "When a government scheme is announced or a job opens and no one from your community is eligible, how do you feel? If you were educated, even you could have applied." She adds, "Only the educated know about their rights. The Mahadalit community is still deprived of education. When they are educated,

they will stand equal with others."

Impact Her Work Is Creating

The change Rajmuni has sparked is tangible — in both numbers and spirit. Over a dozen girls who had dropped out have returned to school, and families now support their daughters' ambitions. Community norms around gender, justice, and alcohol are shifting. What began as small circles of conversation has grown into a quiet social movement restoring dignity and agency to women and girls.

Kiran Kumari, once asked to stay home to cook, now attends school and coaching classes. Ayushi, stopped from attending school by her father, heard songs at the Chaupal, recommitted to study, and her mother resolved not to marry her off early. Laxmi from Bhairavpur, out of school for six years, now is preparing for school with a private tutor while awaiting admission. Others — Neetu, Vandana, Rinki, and Savita — have also resumed education, some with Rajmuni's direct intervention. Most importantly, women have found collective strength.

Rajmuni's vision remains rooted in equity —

entitlements, every girl finishes school till Grade 12 before marriage, and every woman knows her rights and dares to speak up.





Her Words

“Education is not a privilege for the few but a right for all, and it's the only path to true equality. We have suffered individually, but because we come together as a team through the Chaupals, we can fight injustice and ensure no girl is left behind.”

Rita Devi

When a Mother Draws the Line Who She Is

Rita Devi lives in Mushari block of Muzaffarpur, Bihar — one of the many regions where poverty, caste, and gender norms continue to dictate the contours of a woman's life. A mother of three, she works as a daily-wage labourer, waking before sunrise, carrying loads on her back, and returning home only after she has earned enough to put *dal-roti* (food) on the table.

Her childhood was never her own. Married early, her life became defined by survival rather than choice or her own dreams. Today, her world spans a small house, the local market, and the villages she now walks through with a quiet purpose. Outside of work, Rita finds meaning in conversations with other women, sitting on jute mats under the shade of trees, often at the Shiksha Chaupal. This is where she listens deeply, laughs freely, and

reflects on life alongside women who carry similar stories as her. Rita never went to school. And that is perhaps the sharpest thorn she carries even now. She often says she has learned "by living, not from books." This lived experience shaped her — as a mother, a worker, and, eventually, as an advocate for girls' education.

At the Chaupal, she is not a participant; she is a presence. She knows the name of every girl in the community who has dropped out of school and the lane she lives in. She remembers all their stories, not the grim statistics.

The Problem She Saw

Rita watched her first two children, both sons, drop out of school to work and support the family. She knows what it means when poverty



makes decisions for you.

In her community, most girls drop out by Grade 6 because of early marriage, household responsibilities, child labour and caste barriers.

Bihar has one of the highest dropout rates among girls in India, with over 33% not completing secondary school. When it came to her daughter, something shifted. Rita felt something crack inside - she would not let the status quo prevail.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Rita doesn't hold a government post, nor does she run a programme. Her intervention is simple, human, and radical; she refuses to give up.

- **Drawing a personal boundary:** She made a firm decision to keep her daughter at school, resisting neighbours' suggestions to get her married.
- **Daily reinforcement:** Every morning, she encouraged her daughter to attend school and kept a check on her studies in the evening, despite her own long workdays.
- **Door-to-door persuasion:** She then visited homes, urging mothers to delay their daughters' marriages and allow them to study. She spoke to neighbours not as an activist, but as a mother who had herself lived the consequences of dropping out.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

The Shiksha Chaupal became a space where

Rita could articulate and expand her fight. It provided her a community, a shared language, and solidarity — a place for mothers to share their fears and learn from each other. It enabled her to see that her struggle was not personal, but collective, and that she could act.

Why She Went Beyond

Her “why” is rooted in her childhood and her loss. She could not study, neither did her sons. She could not choose, and the pain became her commitment to ensure that her daughter will know more than survival.

“अगर पढ़ेगी, तो समझेगी। समझेगी तो बदलेगी।”

("If she learns, she will understand; if she understands, she will bring change.")

Impact Her Work Is Creating

Her daughter not only stayed in school but also cleared Grade 12 with First Division and is now pursuing a Bachelor's degree. In a village where girls often disappear from classrooms by age 12, this is a milestone.

Beyond her home, Rita's persistent visits have delayed several marriages and kept girls enrolled. During Chauplas, teachers note a visible shift; mothers in Mushari now question and wait before pulling their daughters out.



Her Words

“मैंने ठान लिया कि मेरी बेटी स्कूल ज़रूर जाएगी। हर कोशिश की... आज वह बीए कर रही है। अब मैं दूसरी माँओं से कहती हूँ — शादी से पहले पढ़ाई ज़रूरी है। बदलाव की शुरुआत एक मां के 'ना' कहने से होती है।”

“I was determined that my daughter would definitely go to school. I tried everything... Today she is doing her BA. Now I tell other mothers – education is important before marriage. Change begins with one mother saying no.”



Kavita Kumari

The Power of Asking Why

Who She Is

Kavita Kumari grew up in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, with a physical disability affecting her left leg. In the schools she attended, she was often made to sit in the corner — not because she lacked ability, but because nobody expected anything from her - to dream, learn or succeed. With effort, support, and persistence, she finished school and also a BA in Sociology, a degree that opened her eyes to the fact of how society shapes us, and how questions have the power to reshape society.

Unlike many girls in her village, Kavita has mobility and independence – hard-earned, not given. She walks slowly, sometimes with effort — but she walks into homes, classrooms, fields, and forums where conversations about girls' futures are taking place. She works at the grassroots with Jyoti Mahila Samakhya and Kishori Manch (task force to support girls and

address challenges faced), engaging adolescent girls and women in discussions around dignity, gender, and rights. In her village, she is simply known as “Kavita Didi”— the one who listens and understands.

Beyond her advocacy, she enjoys reading, especially stories about women who refused to remain silent. Music playing softly on her phone is her way to pause, breathe and gather herself for the heaviness of the work she does.

The Problem She Saw

Girls drop out at staggering rates in Bihar — driven by poverty, early marriage, and unpaid domestic labour. Only 17.1% of women in Bihar attend college.

And for girls living with disabilities, girls like



Kavita, the odds are even worse. They are often told they are a burden, denied mobility, visibility, or choice.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Kavita does not preach; she asks questions, she creates room for reflection. She facilitates change by getting women to think aloud, under trees, on verandahs, in Litchi farms.

- **Asking disarming questions:** During Shiksha Chaupal sessions, she sits among mothers and asks gently, “Why don’t you send your daughter to school?”, “Do you want her life to look like yours?”,
- **Holding reflective spaces:** Instead of instructing, she anchors conversations where women think aloud - often for the first time.
- **Mentoring adolescent girls:** Through circle meetings and one-on-one conversations, she listens deeply and helps girls articulate their fears, aspirations - helping them imagine possibilities they didn’t know existed.

Her leadership is radical because it is rooted in dialogue, not direction.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Forums such as Shiksha Chaupal, Jyoti Mahila Samakhya, and Kishori Manch provide Kavita with the physical space and social legitimacy to get women and girls together, facilitate reflection, and mentor adolescents. These spaces amplify her voice; they did not create her leadership, they made it visible.

Why She Went Beyond

Kavita’s motivation is anchored in memory and not in sense of duty. Being underestimated is the fire that sustains her. She says every time she sees a girl shrink her voice, she sees herself, and that is what keeps her going.

Impact Her Work Is Creating

Girls mentored by Kavita now speak about consent, dignity, and rights — words many had never uttered before. Mothers who once stayed silent now ask schools about attendance and safety for their children. Though subtle, the

shift is fundamental: questions are being asked where silence once lived.



Her Words

"In a world that keeps telling women what to do, the most powerful thing is helping them ask why. I dream that every girl in my village will become confident enough to say 'no', and brave enough to imagine 'yes'."



Champa Saha

Learning With Dignity, Living With Confidence

Who She Is

Champa Saha's journey as an educator began not in a carefully designed inclusive classroom, but in one that exposed the system's limitations. After pursuing a B.Ed., her first posting in the late 1980s coincided with India's earliest experiment in inclusive education — the Project Integrated Education for Disabled (PIED).

"I walked into a classroom with three or four learners clearly different from the rest," she recalls. "I felt completely inadequate." Instead of keeping her distance, Champa chose to understand them — reading extensively, speaking to doctors, and observing her students closely.

Those years became her real education. Terms like "cerebral palsy" and "intellectual disability"

became familiar, though autism was rarely discussed then. One student with severe cerebral palsy, had extreme difficulty controlling her hand movements. She longed to write but struggled with the fine motor control needed for regular paper and pencils. When Champa gave her large sheets of drawing paper, for the first time, Jaspreet could move her hands freely and trace letters. This moment shaped Champa's belief in small improvements to unlock a child's potential.

Then in 1994, her second child Ankush's difficult delivery turned her professional journey into a personal one. Doctors predicted he would never read or sit up, but Champa refused to accept that ceiling. She adapted her teaching methods at home, nurturing his abilities. Today, Ankush has defied those predictions — winning a silver medal at the 2019 Special Olympics World Summer Games.



After two decades in school, Champa decided to work independently, mentoring parents and teachers of children with learning difficulties. In 2020, she founded Mayakunj Education Trust in Bengaluru — an inclusive learning space. What began as a pre-primary initiative soon evolved into a home-school for learners with diverse needs. "Mayakunj was never meant to be a crutch, but a stepping stone to discover possibilities", she says.

The Problem She Saw

Champa noticed that most parents of atypical learners came seeking “rectification.” “Almost all parents want atypical minds to be normalised,” she explains. Over time, she realised the deeper issue wasn’t just awareness — it was the system itself, designed only for adult convenience rather than child comfort. “Anything neurodevelopmental is not a disease to be cured. When the primary goal is to make a child fit the existing norms, we’ve already lost the battle. If a three-year-old says they are hungry, we ask them to wait till the bell rings. That’s where self-awareness gets curbed. We’ve built systems that suppress, instead of nurturing it.”

The Micro-Improvement Journey

At Mayakunj, Champa redefined learning by placing students’ mental and emotional comfort before curriculum. She believes that no learning can happen if a child is hungry, tired, or anxious. “If a child hasn’t slept well or comes to class hungry, the brain isn’t ready to learn,” she explains. “It’s the same for all

children — only, for those with neurodevelopmental differences, these needs are heightened or varied. They are not in any sense irrational.”

She builds learning experiences around each child’s individuality. For instance, Ivan, who is non-speaking and autistic, loves buildings and structures. One day, while stacking toys into a tower, Champa watched it fall and explained that it toppled because the base wasn’t wide enough. Ivan listened, then built a sturdier tower himself — learning balance and proportion through play.

- **Individualised learning plans:** Every child learns at their own pace through methods tailored to their sensory, emotional, and cognitive profiles. There are no fixed timetables or uniform goals; instead, learning pathways evolve through continuous observation and dialogue with the child. Each plan integrates cognitive goals (reading, writing), socio-emotional growth (self-expression, managing anxiety), and daily living skills (self-care, navigation, and communication).

- **Comfort of mind before curriculum:** Champa begins each session by ensuring children feel safe and regulated. Lessons may start with storytelling, music, or sensory play — depending on what helps each learner settle. “Only when the mind is at ease can real learning happen,” she says. This emphasis on emotional readiness reduces performance-driven pressure with self-assurance.
- **Everyday life skills as curriculum:** From dressing themselves and pouring water to making small financial transactions during field trips, learners practice decision-making and self-reliance daily. One student with hydrocephalus (a condition in which fluid builds up within the brain, leading to pressure and developmental challenges), once told he’d never manage self-care, now drinks water and uses the washroom independently — milestones that restored his confidence and dignity.
- **Feedback that builds awareness:** Instead of generic praise, Champa uses specific, descriptive feedback that helps children recognise progress. “Rather than

writing ‘good work’ or ‘beautiful handwriting,’ I note what’s gone well — ‘letters are legible, evenly spaced, and clear.’ It helps them see why it’s good, and that awareness motivates them more than praise ever could.”

- **Community learning beyond the classroom:** Weekly outings — to museums, bird sanctuaries, and restaurants — allow children to practice social interaction, sensory regulation, and curiosity outside the classroom. Field experiences are followed by reflection circles where children share what they observed or felt, reinforcing self-expression and awareness.

Why She Went Beyond

Champa’s lifelong conviction is that education should nurture self-awareness, not conformity. “We’ve built systems where children mask themselves just to fit in,” she says. “My work is to make sure they never have to.”

“If a learner doesn’t sit still or respond to general instruction, that doesn’t make them a non-learner,” she explains. “When I celebrate a

child simply holding a pencil, some may see it as trivial. But for that child, it means the world — tomorrow she will go on to feed herself, dress herself, live with dignity.”

Champa believes that the role of teachers is not to fit children into exams, but to help them discover who they are. “The true purpose of education is self-awareness,” she says. “Everything else follows from that.”

Impact Her Work Is Creating

Since 2021, 18 children have found a learning path through Mayakunj. Many of them were once told they would never speak, read, or learn independently. Two of her alumni, once considered “non-readers,” completed their Grade 10 through the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and now study in mainstream schools. One of them, Niranjna Eyyala, born with mild cerebral palsy, is now a student leader at Bethany High in Bengaluru and recently won a school debate competition. Each learner’s growth — from decision-making to choosing their own books on reading trips — reflects the impact of an environment built on trust and belief, not correction.





Her Words

"We need a complete rethinking of how teachers are trained and how learning is defined. Today, teacher education is scattered — millions of authorities, countless certifications, but no common foundation of quality or compassion. Every teacher, no matter their subject, should have basic knowledge of working with learners who see, hear, move, or communicate differently. Just like in medicine, where every doctor first learns about the whole human body before specialising, every teacher should first learn about the full spectrum of learners."

Uma Badve

Agency Unlocked Through Assistive Technology

Who She Is

Uma Badve didn't choose to work with visually impaired students — she was raised alongside them. As an only child in a home that became a sanctuary for blind students across Maharashtra, her childhood was anything but ordinary.

She was 13 when Siddharth Gaikwad, a young blind man who had been living on a footpath for weeks, arrived at her family's doorstep in Pune. He was starving but determined to finish his Grade 10 education. "For the first time in my life, I had to share my mother with someone else," Uma recalls. "And I realised he probably needed her more than I did."

That moment shaped her life. Every year, 15–20 blind students come to Niwant Andha Mukta Vikasalaya, the NGO her parents founded. They became her family — studying, fighting, and celebrating together. Uma wrote

English exam papers for over 50 of them as a trusted scribe. "We had over 150 visually impaired students in our house every day," she chuckles.

After earning an engineering degree, Uma spent around 15 years in corporate roles. Her twenties were for self-discovery, her thirties for financial independence — but she never left Niwant behind. She created a computer science curriculum for blind students, started Niwant's braille greeting card initiative, and performed in orchestras with Niwant students across Pune. "My forties," she reflects, "are about giving back to the community my parents built." Today, she serves as Trustee of Niwant Andha Mukta Vikasalaya, Co-founder of Swalekhan, and Advisor to the Divyang Ayuktalay (Disability Commissioner's Office) for the Maharashtra Government.



The Problem She Saw

As more blind students entered higher education, the demand for scribes grew sharply — but the system was deeply flawed. Government rules required Grade 12 students to be assisted only by Grade 11 writers, creating an acute shortage. Many volunteers had to leave midway through exams, leaving students helpless.

Beyond logistics, the real issue was dependence. Till Grade 7, students with visual impairment study in schools for the visually impaired, where they appear for exams in braille, but once they integrate in regular schools, they require scribes to appear for exams. Hence, after Grade 8, blind students relied entirely on scribes, gradually losing proficiency in braille and confidence in spelling. Seeing this, Uma's father began developing Swalekhan in 2018, a multilingual typing tutor to help them become independent. Knowing Uma's deep connection with visually impaired students, he invited her to contribute. She eagerly joined him, using her engineering and project management experience to turn the prototype into a practical learning tool.

While working with blind schools, Uma discovered another barrier — language. Nearly 99% of blind schools in India teach in regional languages. In Maharashtra, most students think, learn, and write their exams mainly in Marathi — typically, for seven out of eight subjects. For students who thought and dreamed in Marathi, learning to type in an unfamiliar language first was yet another obstacle to independence. Uma knew Swalekhan had to meet students where they were — in their own language.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Uma understood that technology adoption among visually impaired students required restoring confidence first. She's now building Swalekhan with a team of seven visually impaired professionals who handle accessibility testing, student training, and content management across multiple languages, plus Nitin Dhaware, a former Niwant student who developed Swalekhan Test — India's only accessible exam platform.

Her radical thought: What if students never needed a writer at all? Then they'd have to learn to write themselves. Her approach directly addressed each barrier:

- **Bringing training to schools:** Uma identified 16 blind schools across Maharashtra through Niwant's network. Her team brought the app — and trainers — directly to students.
- **Hiring blind trainers:** Ten visually impaired individuals were hired full time. "This wasn't volunteering; it was professional work that deserved compensation," Uma says.
- **Removing excuses:** Many schools lacked computers, so the team provided 200 mobile phones, keyboards, and OTG cables (needed to connect mobile phones to keyboards). "We gave the hardware, the software, and the training."
- **Gamification and local language:** To address the language barrier — 99% of blind schools teach in regional languages — Swalekhan used games to make typing fun and taught Devanagari typing in local languages with human voiceovers, replacing robotic, hard-to-understand English screen readers.
- **Continuous adaptation:** English typing with Marathi instructions, Hindi typing, and Kannada typing were added to meet users' needs

- **Building confidence:** To reverse the loss of spelling confidence and dependence that had plagued students since Grade 8, students progressed through 175 lessons — enough to type 30 words per minute, fast enough to finish exam papers independently.

The results were immediate. Students refused lunch breaks, competing to complete lessons faster.

Then COVID-19 struck. But students, determined to continue, downloaded the app on parents' or siblings' phones. Uma's team mailed 100 keyboards to those who couldn't afford them. By 2022, students themselves demanded typing competitions — the movement had taken root.

Why She Went Beyond

Uma's motivation is rooted in responsibility, practical and personal: "I grew up with privilege. I learned to run large-scale projects, raise funds, and market products. If people like me don't bring those skills to the space, what's the point of our privilege?"

And most of all, it's about agency. "If a blind

person can book an Uber, order from Swiggy, and call a plumber from Urban Company — but still needs a writer to give an exam — something's wrong. I want to change that."

Impact Her Work Is Creating

Over 4,000 students have been trained through Swalekhan. To date, more than 250 students have given their exams independently after learning to type using Swalekhan Typing Tutor, with most using Swalekhan Test, an accessible exam platform built by Niwant. In 2025 alone, 175 students wrote exams independently, including one who completed their Grade 12 boards without a scribe. The app is now used in 26 blind schools across Maharashtra and is expanding to Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, the NCR region, and Bihar.

The real impact lies in stories:

- Sushma, a farmer's daughter, whose mother once burned her braille poems for fuel, now emails her poems to herself after learning Swalekhan. "No one can take that skill from her again."
- During lockdown, Shubham learned how to type using Swalekhan Typing Tutor and

then typed a full-length love story featuring a blind protagonist. He had this idea for a novel for years, but finally found a way to pen it down for everyone to read.

- When Akshay's college teachers suggested that he take the help of a writer for English, he quipped, "Don't sighted people make mistakes? If I make mistakes, they should be mine." He scored 80% in his Grade 12 boards.
- A student from Aurangabad Blind School typed the entire song *Zingaat* perfectly during a poetry contest. "He finally wrote what was in his mind without someone else's hand guiding his thoughts," Uma shares with a smile.
- At one school in Buldana, when computers broke down, students refused to attend until they were fixed — parents demanded actions. "That's when we knew," Uma says, "we'd created real ownership."

Initially, the blind community resisted, fearing decline in academic performance. Today, teachers insist their students learn Swalekhan. One blind teacher in Pune even fought for her students' right to submit typed answers.



Her Words

“25% of the world’s blind population lives in India. We should be leading the world in how blind people live and learn. I want Swalekhan to be available in all regional languages of India and eventually other countries’ languages. If even one child looks at their future without fear because they can write their own exam, we’re on the right path. This is a revolution. And revolutions don’t happen overnight.”

Deepta Belagur

Creating Space for Every Learner



Who She Is

Deepta Belagur had a comfortable childhood rooted in strong family values. And the community outside her home played an equally vital role in shaping her outlook and character. In her hometown, Rayadurga, Andhra Pradesh, she often played with children of the textile mill workers. She discovered early on how fulfilling it felt to include and treat everyone equally. The simple joy of connection stayed with her.

Her teaching journey started in college, when she tutored children in her neighbourhood for free. During the pandemic, she volunteered with Teach For India at their Bridge Programme — an initiative designed to address learning loss. At the same time, she noticed that the children of the domestic helpers in her society had also lost access to education due to school closures. She began teaching six of them at her house, starting with the basics, as

they were not at the expected grade level.

She used household materials to make learning hands-on and relatable. She encouraged mindfulness, healthy routines, and involved parents to create a supportive home environment. She managed it all without any formal teacher training. Over the years, the children reached the appropriate grade levels and were successfully reintegrated into mainstream schools — restoring their confidence and rekindling their love for learning.

This experience revealed her true calling: to make quality and equitable education accessible to every child, regardless of background. To further build an understanding of learning practices, she joined the Gubbachi Learning Community, an education non-profit. There, as a volunteer teacher, she helped students on different learning levels to regain confidence and catch up with their peers.

Currently, Deepta is pursuing a Diploma in Teaching and Learning Practices and dreams of founding her own NGO — one that bridges educational gaps and empowers children to realise their full potential.

The Problem She Saw

Throughout her work, Deepta supported children labelled as 'difficult' - students facing learning or behavioral challenges. She noticed that many children from less privileged families have the ability to learn but lacked equal opportunities. With weak foundational skills and little individual attention in classrooms, they struggled to keep pace and gradually lose confidence. Without the right learning support, these children found it hard to catch up with their peers, missing out on the chance to reach their full potential and aspirations.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Deepta led with empathy. She believes that meaningful learning happens when children are engaged, curious and supported both inside and beyond the classroom. Her approach focuses on small consistent steps that build confidence, understanding and long-term love for learning.

- **Understanding learners:** She began by engaging with teachers and parents to understand both the curriculum expectations and each child's current learning level. Through one-on-one assessments, she identified individual strengths and areas for improvement.
- **Designing customised learning materials:** Based on the insights, she curated simple, level-based worksheets and resources, ensuring that every learner could access materials suited to their needs.
- **Introducing creative and hands-on learning:** To make learning relevant, she turned to everyday household materials — paper plates became clocks, rajma grains demonstrated place value, and chapatis explained fractions. She designed engaging activities to spark curiosity and keep children active, blending academics with joy and movement.
- **Differentiated teaching:** She developed bridge-learning materials and introduced differentiated instruction techniques. She integrated visual and auditory tools such as educational videos and learning apps like Khan Academy, Byju's, and Vedantu to enhance understanding.



- **Engaging parents:** She actively shared videos and worksheets with parents to extend learning at home. She guided them to create simple daily timetables and consistent routines, to build positive and structured learning environments.
- **Building awareness and life skills:** She emphasised the value of education and its long-term impact on a child's life. She introduced basic mindfulness routines — breathing, stretching, and meditation exercises — to improve focus and emotional balance.
- **Preparing students for formal schooling:** As students progressed, she assessed their readiness to transition into mainstream schools. She guided families in selecting appropriate schools based on children's learning levels and affordability. She went a step further — assisting with admissions and even contributing financially when needed, ensuring no child was left behind.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

As a Teach For India Volunteer, Deepta gained first-hand experience of how structured

education initiatives operate. She learned about curriculum design, teaching methodologies, student management, and the challenges that children from underprivileged backgrounds face in their learning journey. At Gubbachi, Deepta observed the importance of tailored learning materials and differentiated teaching for children with diverse learning styles and backgrounds.

Why She Went Beyond

Deepta discovered her deepest fulfilment in bringing happiness and making a meaningful difference in others' lives. She has always sought to be of service, believing that her existence carries a purpose. From an early age, she dreamt of an equal society. Through her initial experiences in teaching, she realised that providing children with quality education is the foundation for a stronger, more equitable society — and ultimately, a better future for the country.

Impact of Her Work

Deepta's empathetic and hands-on approach has transformed the learning journeys of sixteen children who had fallen behind — from the children of domestic helpers to

marginalised learners at Gubbachi.

Through her patient and creative methods, these children not only caught up academically but also regained the confidence to rejoin mainstream classrooms — a transformation reflecting both intellectual and emotional growth.



Her Words

"I am inspired by the idea that when a child is educated, the lives of their entire family and their future generations, are transformed. Education not only gives a child the means to live, but also gives meaning to life. I am more than happy to contribute to any extent if that can benefit a life."



Narasimha K.S.

Reclaiming Dignity, Rebuilding Schools, Rekindling Learning

Who He Is

Narasimha K.S. was born in Shivara Colony village, Mandya, Karnataka in a lower middle class agricultural family. He remains closely connected to his village. He grew up there, completed his schooling until Grade 5 in the Government Ashrama School and continues to live within the same community today.

Throughout his educational journey, Narasimha has been connected to public education. He received consistent support and guidance from his teachers both during school and college. A learning-friendly environment, alongside the companionship of wonderful friends, nurtured learning, gradually shaping his thinking, goals, and purpose in life.

Narasimha strongly believes that public schools have the power to change lives. He considers his own journey as proof — that with the right guidance, awareness, and community support,

children from any background can succeed. Currently, he is a final year student at Mandya University, pursuing his dream of becoming a psychologist. This aspiration is closely tied to his desire to support children from public schools and rural communities to grow academically, emotionally, and mentally.

The Problem He Saw

Not long ago, Narasimha participated in the “Yuva Hejje” program, under the Shikshagraha movement, led by V-Help organisation at his college. Yuva Hejje is a simple idea — youth observe education challenges within their communities and act to address them.

Through Shikshana Chavadi — localised spaces for dialogue and collaboration which bring together women to identify and dismantle socio-cultural barriers to education and co-create solutions — women leaders identified



families where children were out of school. Building on this effort, Narasimha and four of his friends visited government schools and villages in Kandali village (Mandya) to understand the challenges faced by students, teachers, and parents.

They observed persistently low student attendance. Several children were either irregular or not enrolled at all. Some were working in hotels, and grocery shops, in nearby areas like Maruganahalli, to contribute to the household income. The children lacked ambition and focus, not because they were incapable, but because they had limited exposure and guidance. Their parents were unaware of the long-term importance of education, with daily financial struggles dominating their decisions.

The group further discovered a structural barrier: that many children were unable to attend or continue school due to the absence of essential documents such as Aadhaar cards, ration cards, income and caste certificates.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

- **Identification of challenges:** Through home visits, 29 children were identified who lacked the documents, and in 12 households, scholarships had not renewed due to missing or incorrect records.
- **Enrolment campaign:** They conducted door-to-door enrollment drives, patiently guiding parents on how to obtain these documents and through the admission process, especially for children from marginalised SC and ST communities.
- **Building reading habits through school library:** At a Government Girls High School, students had never fully understood how a library could support their learning. The team conducted an awareness program for 30 students focusing on the effective use of library.
- **Creating reading corners:** To extend learning beyond school hours, reading corners were setup in Hosabudanur, Mangala, Kottatti, and Maruganahalli villages. 190+ households were supported to create simple reading spaces at home.

- **Counselling parents & children:** Narasimha led conversations with parents on the risks of child labour and the long-term value of education over short-term income. With students, they discussed the proper use [and misuse] of mobile phones, explaining the effects on their concentration and academic performance.

Narasimha was personally involved throughout - counseling children who lacked confidence, motivating students to continue their education beyond Grade 10, and engaging parents facing financial strains. These conversations deepened his understanding of social, emotional and economic pressures shaping families and educational decisions.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Rani from V-Help mentored Narasimha, helping him connect with the school and the community and offer the requisite support. Being part of the Shikshagraha movement provided deeper exposure to community realities and awakened his interest in social

service. It helped him understand what people worry about, what pressures they face, and how small interventions can create meaningful change — strengthening the commitment to his own goal.

Why He Went Beyond

Having studied entirely in government and aided institutions, Narasimha has closely experienced the realities of public education. While his personal journey was positive, he slowly realised that many children around him were unable to continue their education due to social, economic, and psychological challenges. He knows he can make a difference in others' lives.

Impact His Work Is Creating

Admissions were facilitated for 29 students. After the awareness sessions, nearly 15 students have become regular library users. Reading corners have become a structured space for studying — they have helped over 200 children develop a habit of reading, and reduce distractions.

Narasimha continues to engage with schools and colleges, leading awareness campaigns

alongside peers and local communities, to reinforce the importance of education.



His Words

“Contrary to common belief, I have never felt deprived of opportunities. My teachers, schools, and learning environment has always given me the confidence to dream big. Through education and service, I now want to give back to the system that shaped me — and work towards building a future where no child is denied education due to lack of awareness or support.”



Rakib Sayyed

Education as a Path to Service

Who He Is

Rakib Sayyed's family moved to Pune, when he was a year old. Coming from an underprivileged family, his means were limited, but not his ambitions. Rakib studied in ABVS Akanksha School, a Public Private Partnership model school where civil society and government institutions collaborate to provide quality education.

When Rakib was in Grade 10, one of his teachers, a Teach For India fellow, Mitalee Dalal, introduced the Baha'i Faith to the students. Mitalee began by exposing them to values such as love, kindness, truthfulness, unity, and oneness. The intention was to help students understand how to serve others and become better human beings.

Since then, Rakib has graduated, and Mitalee has moved on from her role. However, the conversations have continued. Over the past seven years, Rakib has been part of a small

group of students who meet with Mitalee every week to explore spirituality and community service. These conversations laid the foundation of what Rakib does today.

A year and a half ago, he quit his IT job and joined The Panaah Communities, a non-profit organisation with a vision to reimagine how children from underserved communities spend their time after school. Its mission is to equip children and youth from high-need communities with the skills, competencies, and mindsets needed to thrive in the future economy.

Rakib currently leads the PathMakers Programme, which aims to reintegrate school dropouts into mainstream education. He manages the programme development and execution, and also teaches Mathematics and Computers.

The weekly discussions with Mitalee helped



Rakib discovered his purpose: to give back to his community. He believes that one of the best ways to do this is through quality education - by creating supportive environments where every child can thrive. His values aligned deeply with Panaah's mission, and he dreams of one day building a chain of schools serving underprivileged communities.

The Problem He Saw

Many students from low-income backgrounds drop out of school for a range of complex reasons. They often struggle to meet the demands of the formal education system — learning in English-medium schools, keeping pace with rigid syllabi, completing written assignments and homework without adequate support at home, memorising content-heavy lessons or affording school materials and private tuition. They also find it difficult to adapt to exam- and marks-focused teaching methods that fail to account for their diverse learning levels.

At Panaah, Rakib realised that students were behind their grade levels and needed to strengthen foundational skills before engaging with the grade-level curriculum. This foundation was critical to ensure that every student began the academic year with confidence, skills and readiness for continued success. Without it, many had already fallen behind and dropped out, reducing their chances of future social and economic mobility.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

To strengthen core competencies in language, numeracy, and comprehension, Rakib designed a two month crash course.

- **Baseline assessment:** A simple diagnostic test was conducted to understand each student's literacy and numeracy levels.
- **Student groups:** Students were divided into three broad learning groups based on assessment results, with the flexibility to move between groups as levels improved.
- **Curriculum design:** Learning modules, materials, activity based learning methods, appropriate textbooks, and peer learning strategies were curated and adapted to each student's needs.
- **Lessons:** Students attended five to six hours of sessions every day, which combined group instruction, peer tutoring, and self-paced activities, along with progress tracking through mini-assessments and tests.



- Life Skills development:** Curiosity, collaboration, confidence was also built in students through activities, games and reflection exercises.
- Monitoring and feedback:** Teachers tracked each student's progress. Weekly reviews allowed for adjustments in the learning pace or regrouping as required.
- Endline assessment and transition:** Based on the final assessment, students transitioned to appropriate learning programs under Panaah. Results guided the instructional planning for the regular academic year.

Why He Went Beyond

Six of Rakib's former students — Faizan, Prachi, Sumaiya, Rehaan, Alfiya & Abuzar — now work with him at Panaah across various student-support functions. Seeing them excel gives him hope for more students. He believes that if we continue to build a system that enables them to do their best, they will also end up doing great. But without that support, they will be lost.

Impact His Work Is Creating

- Previous Year:** The program benefited over 75 students, of whom 74 successfully cleared their Grade 10 examinations and enrolled in junior colleges. Six of them are now working at Panaah. The 75th student is set to reappear this year.
- Current Year:** 76 students were enrolled in the program and are confidently preparing for their board examinations scheduled in March 2026.





His Words

"The education system still does not accommodate everyone. If students are unable to fit, they are eliminated without an effort to design the system that caters to their needs. We have the right to education enshrined, but quality education does not exist, yet. Every student needs a second chance and we need to carry the extra load for them."

Sasitha Manimaran

Reclaiming Communities from Drug Influence

Who She Is

In Kalapet, Puducherry, a fisherman community, 22-year-old Sasitha Manimaran grew up in a family that valued responsibility and survival over individual aspirations. After completing Grade 12, Sasitha wanted to become a guitarist and musician. But like many households in the neighbourhood, her family expected her to either continue the tradition of fishing-related work or marry and settle into domestic life. Music was viewed as uncertain and impractical.

For the next two years, she remained at home, negotiating family expectations while quietly questioning her future. She eventually enrolled in the Microbiology course, choosing a path that balanced familial responsibility with her desire to do something meaningful. At college, her professor Satish Kumar recognised her curiosity and resolve, encouraging her to see education not merely as personal advancement, but as a tool for social responsibility.

This mentorship played a key role in shaping her purpose. Sasitha had always been deeply empathetic. Her mother recalls how strongly she reacted to the struggles of others, particularly in moments of injustice. Growing up, Sasitha witnessed children dropping out of school, girls being married early, and rising substance use among youth. One incident stayed with her — seeing an eight-year-old consuming marijuana in her neighbourhood. This solidified for her how early and deeply, neglect had taken root in her community.

The Problem She Saw

Kalapet is caught in cycles of neglect that influence everyday choices. Most families depend on fishing for income, and children are often introduced to the trade early. For many households, continued education is uncertain and expensive, while early marriage is a way to reduce financial burden — especially for girls.



There is little sustained focus on education, youth development, or alternative livelihoods. In this vacuum, drug use grew and eventually became profitable. What affected Sasitha most was seeing a close friend, someone with academic potential, arrested for selling marijuana near a school. For many young people, peddling offered quicker income [than fishing] and far fewer barriers than education. It was a symptom of limited choices rather than individual failure.

Girls faced additional constraints. Sasitha's parents, however chose a different path — supporting her education and helping others in need. This contrast reinforced her belief that individual progress carries a responsibility toward the wider community.

The Micro-Improvement Journey

Sasitha's engagement began through the National Service Scheme (NSS) at her college, under the guidance of Professor Satish Kumar. What followed were micro, deliberate actions rooted in collective effort:

- **Awareness within the campus:** NSS volunteers, including Sasitha initiated awareness sessions and discussions on drug use, focussing on youth.
- **Documenting ground realities:** Students and faculty systematically noted drug sale and use near schools and public spaces.
- **Escalation through institutions:** With faculty support, concerns were formally raised with local authorities.
- **Engagement with authorities:** Inputs from an organised college platform prompted greater seriousness and a coordinated police response - leading to crackdown on drug peddlers in the area.

Role of Civil Society & Support Systems

Sasitha's strongest support systems remains her parents and college mentors, who encouraged her to speak up, and persist even when change felt slow or unattainable. Additionally, TYLC (Trust for Youth and Children), the only NGO to reach her community so far, gave her a glimpse of how civil society can catalyse local change. She hopes to see more collaborations expand in Kalapet.



Why She Went Beyond

Sasitha's motivation comes from her impulse to stop problems rather than watch them unfold. Her dream of becoming an IAS officer continues to guide her, even as subtle pressure to marry continues. She remains anchored in the belief that service is not to be postponed by circumstance.

Impact Her Work Is Creating

Through sustained engagement by the college and follow-up with authorities, visible shifts have been seen. Police patrols increased near areas and public spaces, and open drug sale reduced noticeably over the following months.

Fewer dealers were reported operating in

familiar locations. Faster response to complaints has signalled a change in how seriously the issue was treated.

Sasitha remains cautious in claiming success. For her, these changes mark a beginning, not closure. The real measure, she believes, will be whether young people increasingly choose safer paths over time.



Her Words

"I want to build something rooted in my community — something that focuses on education, awareness, and mental health. Here, mental health is still dismissed as superstition, and silence causes as much harm as visible issues like substance use or school dropouts. I choose to stay engaged with the community and to keep acting where I can. I do not believe leadership means standing in front of people. It means standing behind them - enabling others to act, grow, and imagine better futures together. This is the path I want to walk."



Acknowledgements

Small Steps to Build Great Schools Volume II is a reflection of the spirit and purpose of Shikshagraha, the people's movement for education equity. At the heart of the movement's work is a simple yet profound belief - that every child in India deserves a fair shot at a bright future, and our public schools can and must work.

This collection of education leader stories came to life because of the organisations and individuals who generously contributed their time, stories and thought. Their belief in the mission strengthens our resolve to amplify the voices of the remarkable grassroot leaders — administrators, teachers, school heads, women, youth, and community members. These leaders are innovatively, courageously shifting the norms that have long held education back. The Shikshagraha Team is deeply grateful to all our contributors for helping us bring these stories of change and commitment to light.

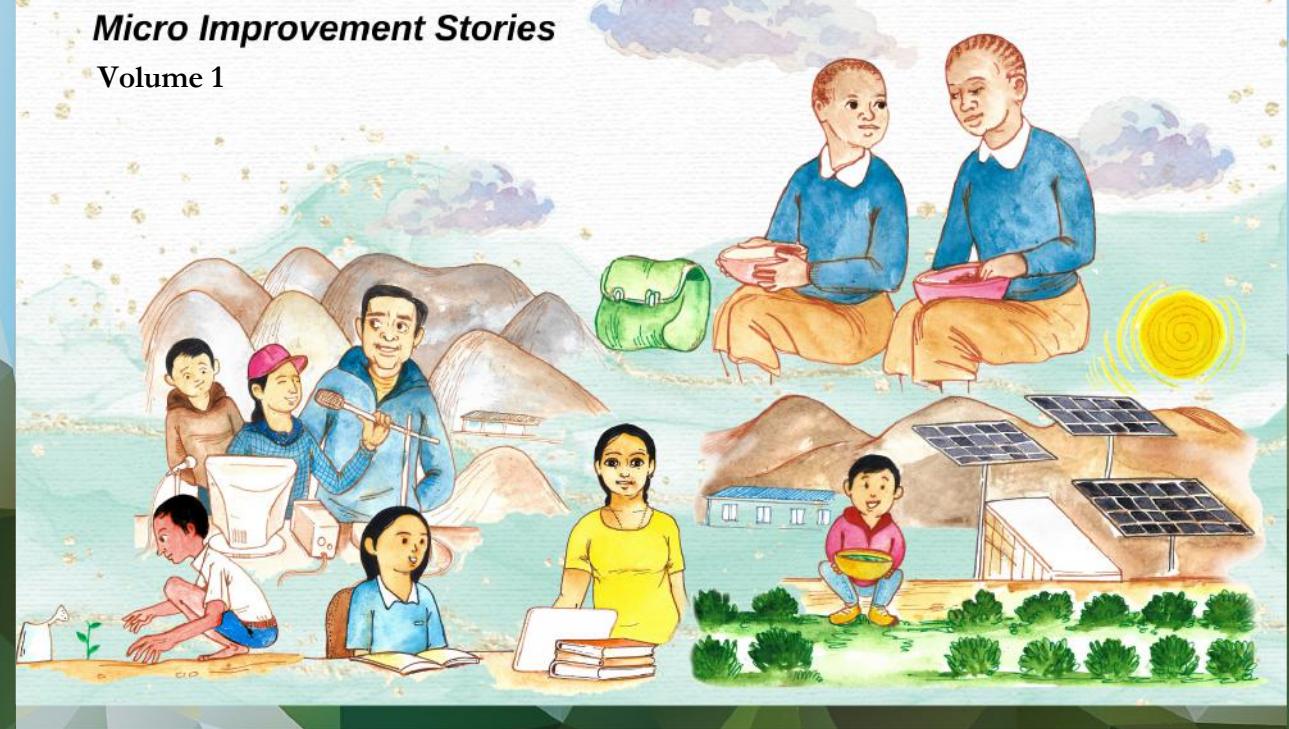


If you know an education leader who is building a more equitable and inclusive public education system, we would love to hear their story! Write to us at connect@shikshagraha.org, and let's celebrate their work together in the next volume of Small Steps to Build Great Schools.

Small Steps To Build Great Schools

Micro Improvement Stories

Volume 1



Small Steps to Build Great Schools – Volume I, a collection of **21 inspiring stories** of education leaders from both India and outside India. These stories capture the early spirit of **Shikshagraha** and the **micro-improvement** mindset that continues to guide this movement.



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