

CASE STORIES



PROLOGUE

“Every conversation has a tale to tell.”

Sneh Samwad, a joint collaboration of UNICEF and Saajha aimed at supporting families to enable learning, well-being, and safety of their children, the period July 2020- December 2020.

In over 256 hours of conversations between a teacher and someone from the student’s family, we managed to record a few stories. This document is an attempt to narrate the emotions, demonstrate the realities and convey the ability of conversations among parents and teachers can have in a child’s life.

**The original names of the teachers, parents and children have been changed to maintain anonymity.*



A single mother's weals and woes



Asha is motivating women in her community to fight against domestic violence and take steps to ensure a better future for their children*

“My husband was a demon. He is an uneducated man, with no zeal to work for his family. I was abused mentally, physically and emotionally all throughout the years when I was with him. I don’t want my son Ravi to be anything like him. Three years ago, with the help of a relative, I left him. I have broken all ties with him.”, explained Asha, who is helping other women to take stand against domestic violence, and start taking care of their children completely.*

Ravi is now seven-year-old, enrolled in the nearby municipality school at Dharavi. While Asha is working as a sanitation worker to make her ends meet. She is a regular in Parent-teacher meetings-with a sole aim to understand from the teacher on what ways she can contribute in her child’s life, academically as well as in his behaviour. She understands the importance of values, education. Her source of motivation comes from the

appreciation of her child from his class teacher. She is the only parent from Ravi's class who ensures that she regularly updates her mobile number in the school records and of the teacher on her phone.

When the pandemic hit and shut the schools for an indefinite period- Asha was scared from the COVID-19 spread in her locality, confused about what to do to keep her child safe and worried about how Ravi will cope up with his studies. She called the class teacher (on the three different phone numbers) multiple times to ask for guidance. During her endeavour to reach out to the teacher, she was elated when she received a call from Ravi's school as part of the project Sneh Samwad to ask about their well being and coupled with a few questions about their house and online learning resources for Ravi. Asha was informed by the Sneh Shikshak, that Ravi's class teacher hasn't been keeping well hence couldn't respond earlier.

"I am grateful to the Sneh Shikshak, who took out time to ask about us and my child. I will follow and take responsibility for all efforts that are being made for my child by the school teachers. They (teachers) are literate people who can



guide clueless mothers like me and together we can work for our child's betterment. Even when the schools are shut, to keep us safe from the virus- nothing should stop the growth of the child " mentioned the dedicated mother.

Hope is fostered again in Asha's heart for her child to continue with his academics, she tells her neighbours as well about the initiative and for them to stay connected with the teachers.

Far away, yet connected



It is predicted that 743 million girls will miss out on their education, and 10 million more secondary school-aged girls are to be out of school before the pandemic is over.

Five years ago, Manoj* along with his wife and daughter migrated from his village in Bihar to Mumbai. He opened a small shop near the temple; selling flowers, incense sticks and earthen pots. His wife stayed home most of the time and helped in Manoj's work especially during the festivals. They admitted their daughter, Sweety in grade three in the school closest to their home. While Manjo was

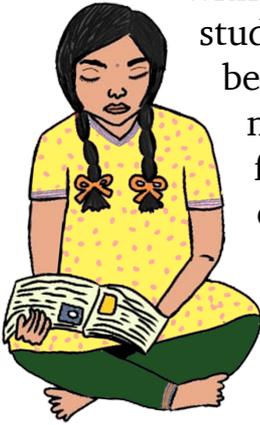
earning a livelihood in Mumbai, his brother and their respective families were in the village.

When the pandemic hit, temples were shut for an indefinite period. This severely impacted their savings forcing them to move back to the village. Manoj started working in the field along with his brothers while his wife and daughter spent most time chit-chatting, doing house chores with other joint-family of a total of 35 relatives.

Manoj tried all means to ensure that Sweety doesn't lose her interest in studies. Since the older family members aren't supportive of educating girls, he woke her up at 4 am before the elders of the household got up to practise maths sums and revise Marathi chapters with her. In anticipation that once the schools and temple complex reopens he would return to Mumbai. He gave his smartphone to his daughter for her to do her play games, watch videos while he is out on the farm, while started using an old keypad phone for his own use. The phone number of the smartphone was also the one registered at the school. The day the Sneh Shikshak called, Sweety responded and asked to call back in the evening to speak with her parents.

Later in the evening, Manoj answered the phone and expressed his gratitude to the Sneh Shikshak- "My child, my home, my phone- all belongs to the teachers. Call us anytime in the day. My relatives call

me mad when I tell them that I kept my smartphone with Sweety for her studies. They say no studies can be done over the phone! I believe at least something can be done if nothing. Now I have six children at my family home including my own daughter and her cousins, even one text or call related to their studies will help us. My fight for my daughter's right to education will not go in the vain cause of the pandemic”.



Paradoxical ties, proven wrong

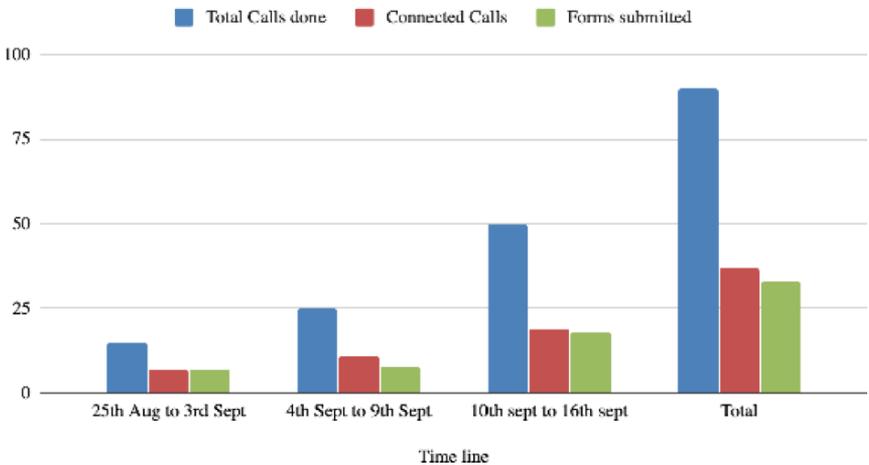


Sports teachers or PE teachers are often seen taking up specific tasks. Ramesh's is elated to be not just recognised, as well as being and appreciated by parents across all classes of his school.*

Ramesh* an avid sportsperson, and for his love for children, he joined BMC school as a Sports teacher 9 years ago. His interaction was limited with one student for a maximum of 35 minutes each week. Only a few students were in the school sports team, Ramesh knew them well and had met their parents as well.

When the project Sneh Sanwad was rolled out, Ramesh was apprehensive about calling- he thought that families won't respond to him nor he could build that connection like a class teacher would do. He was concerned that they won't trust him with the knowledge regarding academics. With reluctance, he volunteered as a Sneh Shikshak thinking that it would be a change from his daily routine during the pandemic lockdown.

Post 5-6 calls, to his surprise- parents (across all classes), recognised him, acknowledged his role in their child's life and thanked him for calling them. He is now motivated to take this program forward and even proposed this in his wife's school in Thane.



The graph above depicts the calling status of Ramesh as part of the project over weeks.

My father is my role model



माझ्या वडिलांनी माझ्यावर आणि माझ्या स्वप्नांवर विश्वास ठेवला
(*My father believed in me, and my dreams*)

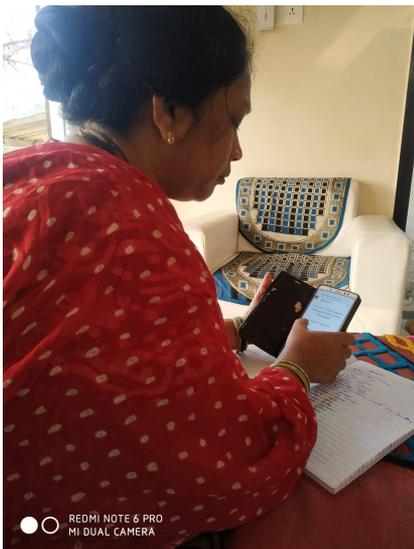
“I was still in college when my father got me married. My first daughter was born after a year. The same year, my husband, a bank official, was transferred to another state. My father asked me to continue my studies in Thane while he took care of my daughter. This went on for almost three years; me, my father and daughter stayed in Thane.”, recalls Savita*, a quinquagenarian from her home in Mumbai.

Now, her daughter is married, her husband has been retired and her father is practising on how to use his latest smartphone.

“It was almost 29 years ago when I received my job offer letter from B.M.C. (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation) to join as a teacher. I was shocked, as I never had even applied for the job role. My father had filled out the application form on my behalf after getting it checked from my husband. I was happy knowing that while women of my age rarely get supported by their families to work; I had two people to encourage me.”, says Savita.

A strong believer in doing good for all. She actively takes up roles in the school, and the pandemic time was no different. While managing her work to help children in the lockdown via books distribution, updating records, worksheet distribution, she also invests her time and efforts in giving our ration, clothes to the ones in need. When she was informed about Sneh Samwad, she found more strength that there now will be a planned, structured and most importantly a united way to connect parents to the schools.

It is imperative for the parents to understand the role of education, continued learning and to ensure the well- being of the child. “Who would understand this better than me, my father is the perfect example of what a child could achieve only when they are better informed and invested.”, says Savita



One of the factors that encourage parents to actively participate in a child's learning is the impact of their parents on them. As per Karen Mapp, professor Harvard Graduate School of Education and an expert on family engagement, “The parents who reported that their

families were actively involved in their education described a link between the example set by their families and why and how they were involved.” Similarly, helping teachers to reflect on the positive connections and involvement of their families/parents in their life has been one of the most powerful tools to inspire a teacher to connect with parents. Savita ensures that she becomes a key part of the Sneh Sanwad project. Her commitment to engaging with families stems out as a gratitude for her parents.

Family first



As per [UNICEF](#) “A family is the first line of protection for children”

Shirin is a homemaker. She resides with her husband and two children in a slum setting of urban Mumbai. When the countrywide lockdown was announced, her husband lost his work. They were forced to stop all non-essential expenses. To survive the ordeals, her husband started helping people who were moving away from city life, likely returning to their native place due to paucity of earnings.

“He is gone for days on end, doing odd jobs so we can eat”, she explains. With schools shut down, the onus of the children’s continued learning fell on Shirin. But her worries are many. “I have tuberculosis—this is the third time—and am on medication for four more months. I want to help them study, but don’t feel well enough on most days. What can I do, I can only keep them healthy if I am.” Shirin’s mother, an elderly woman, is supporting (financially and emotionally) her by working as a help in the nearby gated community.

“The Sneh Samwad programme has been a blessing in disguise.”, she claims. Both children’s teachers have contacted Shirin in the past weeks. “I have only one phone which they both use to study online, but I did not have enough money to recharge the balance. I mentioned this to the teacher when she called, and she immediately recharged my phone balance”, she reveals.

Shirin is really grateful to the Sneh Shikshaks for their immense support. “I am very open with them about all my problems, and they always help. One day before I know my phone balance will run out, I call one of them and they add money so my kids can continue to study.” In the midst of a pandemic, teachers have become the sole external contact for many families, whom they trust to solve problems, not just academics.

“We are on lockdown but we are okay. Everything’s good, we are happy at home”, says Shirin.

A sibling’s role



Siblings influence each other directly—by shaping behaviour during everyday interactions and acting as role models

The phone bell rang twice before a frazzled boy answered it- “I’m driving. I’ll call you in a while”. Three hours later he called back, “As-salaam-alaikum. Sorry I couldn’t call back earlier. Yes, tell me.”

I inquired about Ziya, a six-year-old enrolled in the BMC Urdu school in Dharavi. “Ziya is my younger sister and in the first grade. She has been studying online via WhatsApp since classes began”, he says. While Imran’s number is registered with the school, he isn’t a big participant in her school activities. Even though he’s answering questions patiently, he seems to have more important things to do. Imran knows the Sneh Shikshak calls often but it’s likely their parents attend the calls since he doesn’t know of Ziya’s coursework or what the teacher says.

“She goes to school about once a week to collect papers and homework. No, I don’t go, either my mother or father go along with her.” The teacher calls to make sure Ziya has the material and is able to study at home. Imran says they’re happy with their experience of the Sneh Samwad programme, and wouldn’t change anything. It’s likely their parents have more inputs on this experience.



“I am 18 years old, working as an auto-driver. I wasn’t able to continue my studies. I am earning for my family so that my siblings can study and become independent. While my parents are ageing with less scope of employment during the pandemic.”

There is [evidence of inequality](#) in educational attainment within households and between siblings, and in developing countries, the [likelihood of later-born children](#) having better educational outcomes. As per [UNICEF](#), there are close to six million out-of-school children in India, and 29 of 100 students—often from marginalized backgrounds—drop out of school before completing the full cycle of elementary education. One hopes that Imran’s case is not such, and to ensure equal opportunities for education to all children in India.

***This is a conversation encountered between the representative from Saajha to gauge feedback on the program and the elder brother of the student.*

Empathic conversations



The job role of teachers has been altered and attributed to an understanding of the present trends.

Poornima* has been an art-craft teacher for the last fifteen years. She said that being an arts and crafts teacher is the best because it is every student's favourite subject and she automatically becomes their favourite teacher. They forget all their worries during their art class and she is also happy working with children.

Poornima comes from a family of teachers and therefore she always wanted to be a teacher as well. When she agreed to volunteer for the Sneh-Samwaad, she was assigned a list of parents/guardians of a different school. She was really scared because she didn't know any of these parents and was worried about how they would react.

Adding to her experience, she said, “But within three days of calling, I gained some confidence and now I’m happy that I got this opportunity to interact with the guardians and understand them better. I’m thankful that the Sneh-Samwaad project helped me get over the fear of talking to parents.” Poornima also said that volunteering for the project was a huge learning experience for her.

She realised that she and her children are very privileged. “We have all the amenities but we don’t recognise their value. Meanwhile, there are kids who struggle to attend classes because they don’t have phones or money to recharge their phones or network in their areas.”

***This is a conversation encountered between the representative from Saajha to gauge feedback on the program and a Sneh Shikshak.*



Unrestricted schooling hours



Many children in [underserved communities](#) have working parents who are essential workers and thus are left with little to no assistance at home. There are no time boundaries to connect with the families owing to the limited technology access.

Praveen* is a daily wage worker with an enterprise producing school bags. The pandemic imposed lockdown, with most schools continuing to remain closed- his work was shut. As the sole bread earner in a family with four children and was compelled to borrow Rs 1 lakh to take care of basic needs. He is on a brink of urban poverty. Along with the worry about his children's education. "A good education is the only route for my children to do better in life, but how will the tree flourish if the roots are not strong," he says Mumbai while sharing his worries about education through mobile phones.

There is only one mobile phone at this home, which he carries with him when he goes out in search of work, which limits the duration for which children can access the mobile phone. In addition to that, the total time available further gets divided among four children, which provides them with limited time to study. *"I feel guilty that my children's education is*

getting affected because I can only afford to have a single mobile phone,” says Praveen.

In these trying circumstances, a ray of hope and support has been the calls from teachers through the Sneh Samwad programme. Praveen lauds the teachers for regularly calling him and checking how the children are coping with studies. *“There have been times when I have told the teachers that I will be home at 11 pm in the night, they made it a point to call then to support my children and clarify their doubts.”* Be it early in the morning, before Praveen left for work, or an hour or two when he would be home in the afternoon for lunch, the teachers called him based on his schedule. *“Now, they call to tell me when the school is open so that the kids can go to school. I make it a point to inform them immediately,”* he adds.

Praveen admits that this involvement in his children’s education is definitely new as he is getting to directly interact with teachers. But he strongly feels that there has to be a more sustainable solution to this, as education in classrooms can’t be substituted by mobile phones. *“Maybe a few students, who are bright, will be able to study through mobiles, but for the rest, it is still difficult to catch up,”* he remarks.

Consideration, a two-way norm



Consideration and empathy is a powerful tool that can help us to understand what is driving the behaviour, and help to connect while working through in different situations.

Zeenat's* mother Bahaar* is a fierce woman. She is a strong and independent mother who is going all the way to ensure that her daughters receive education, the father is detached from the situation. His number is registered with the school but when asked he did not know anything- even the classes his daughters are in, "I don't know anything about it. Please call the home number and ask my wife," he said.

Bahaar understands the importance of education and has enrolled her other two daughters in the nearby government school. She knows everything about the school- Headmasters name, teachers who teach, SMC members and the classes and subjects her daughters are learning.

She believes that it is incredibly essential to keep in touch with the



school/teachers because of the assistance she might need. However, while she featured on the teacher's list of the parents who have been in touch with her under the program Sneh Samwad, Bahaar said she has not been contacted by any teacher. Nonetheless, she doesn't see this as an issue. She empathises with the teachers and understands their struggles. "If I need something or if I have any doubts, I go and ask the teacher myself. I don't wait for them to reach out to me. I understand the teachers are overburdened right now. They work with children throughout the day, and they must be exhausted by the end of it," Bahaar added.

This draws light to the measures that are required to ensure both parents equally participate in their children's education, and on the importance of communication between parents and teachers.

Beyond education



How often do we list out the challenges to continue education, specifically in the pandemic? Moreover, what do we do to overcome these?

Preeti* is a college graduate, with interest in the development sector. During his college break, he was

supporting Saajha as a volunteer for the Sneh Samwad program to connect with families. During one of the conversations, she dialled a number of Rani* who presently resides in one of the innermost lanes of the urban Mumbai slum. “Even sunlight refuses to reach my house. All I have is my two children to look after. My husband passed away two years ago.” mentioned Rani.

Building a rapport with someone and gaining their trust via calls can be a challenging process. It often drives people to hide what they really feel in a faceless conversation and present a different picture- Preeti understood this very well.

As the conversation moved, a worried mother explained, “ Education is the last thing in my mind right now. My youngest son has been diagnosed with a heart condition which needs to be operated immediately. I don’t have money or resources to take care of the expenses. Do you think at this time, I would be checking the school worksheets or be asking my children to revise their lessons.”

The pandemic has resulted in schools being shut as well as put pressure on the families to strive through the loss of jobs, health conditions, and stress. “I couldn’t sleep all night after this call.”, informed Preeti to her reporting manager at Saajha.

Next morning, Preeti contacted her friend's father who works in a private hospital. He assured that some fee relaxation can be done for Rani's child by using the income certificates and ration card. However, Preeti has apprehensions regarding whether Rani would take her support if she should even help her. She shared this information with Saajha manager and sought clarity regarding this.

Together they reached out to Rani again, and this time not asking about school or study-related matters but to ask if she is willing to trust them. "I was losing all hopes. God sure isn't angry at me. Let me know what needs to be done.", said Rani.

The total cost of the treatment was around 3lakhs rupees. In the next 10 days, Preeti arranged for all documents. Finally, a cost relaxation of Rupees 1.5 lakhs was approved by the hospital authorities. Rani had arranged some amount from her relatives. The remaining amount is being arranged by Preeti and her friends; they have applied to temple trusts, Chief minister's fund and are crowdsourcing it.

"The money will be completed by another week. Rani and her kids will visit the hospital. All arrangements will be taken care of by the hospital staff. I would be there to support them. I am extremely happy that next time when I call Rani, she would be revising lessons with her children, with lesser worries on her head.", exclaimed Preeti.



Contact us: collaborate@saajha.org