



FOR  
**OUR**  
CHILDREN

10 STORIES OF HOPE AND RESILIENCE



# I N T R O D U C T I O N

These 10 case studies are the product of a year-long study conducted as part of the Experiential Training Module at the Young India Fellowship (Ashoka University, Sonapat) for Saajha. These case studies focus on the School Management Committees (SMCs) and the Ashramshalas in tribal Maharashtra. They are told from the point-of-view of parents—members and non-members of SMCs—Principals of Ashramshalas, and the officials of the Tribal Development Department, giving the reader a comprehensive understanding of the SMCs, and its role in the Ashramshala. The case studies dive deep into the troubles faced by the students in the Ashramshala, as recounted by various stakeholders, and the progress—through infrastructure and instruction—they expect to promote children's education and their overall development. Each case study is a tale of hope and resilience during difficult times, with the yearning for change and the betterment of the children residing and studying in these Ashramshalas.



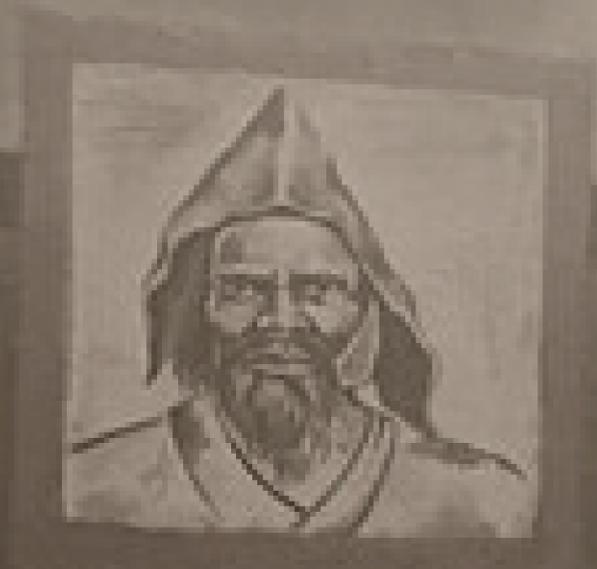
# B E Y O N D   T H E A S H R A M S H A L A

A former teacher and currently the Education Extension Officer at Dahanu, Suresh Sir\* has been working persistently in the field of education for almost 23 years now. He visits Ashramshalas and enquires about the education facilities and workings of the schools and takes keen interest in knowing if the children are studying well. He aspires for the best education for the students and presses that, *“the education status of the Ashramshalas should be improved and the SMCs should work towards this cause”*. He is of the opinion that SMCs are in place to solve issues that Ashramshalas and their students might have without any delay. And that for the smooth functioning of SMCs, the parents play an important part. He strongly believes that every child has the potential and capability, and there needs to be a good environment to nurture this potential of every child. He emphasises that Ashramshala, SMCs and every stakeholder should work towards creating that environment to help children realise their potential.

When asked about the future paths taken by students from the Ashramshalas, Suresh Sir, very proudly claimed that, *“no child stays back”*. Suresh Sir believes that out of the 60 students in the 12th grade last year, most of them went on to study further: some pursue Science, some Arts and some do diploma courses. Everybody goes into the field they want to study.

In his 23 years of experience, he has come across students who have become police officers, doctors, engineers and bankers. Seeing students prosper makes him happier and all the more motivated to work further.

\*names have been changed



# वीर लढ्यातील

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# B E F O R E C O V I D - 1 9 , E V E R Y T H I N G W A S F I N E

School Management Committee (SMC) is fairly recent in the functioning of Ashramshalas in Maharashtra. Sushma\* has been working as an SMC member for the last two years. They used to have weekly meetings but it has been halted due to the COVID-19 situation. Schools are shut down and classes have been moved online, taking students by surprise and confusion. It is one of Sushma's main concerns that the pandemic has hit the children's education the hardest and she believes that there needs to be some way. She has reached out to the teachers regarding the same and has gathered students to study together. Sushma's elder daughter, who also once studied in the Ashramshalas, has come forward and is teaching students from her locality at their home.

Sushma says that apart from the pandemic situation and the online education, there are no obstacles in the schools and that *"everything is fine"*. As an SMC member, she has worked to make the Ashramshalas a better place to study for the students. Their SMC has taken and resolved complaints ranging from broken taps, dysfunctional lights to damaged pipes and many more. One improvement she would want to see is that the *"teachers should pay attention to the students and studies must be done well"*. Sushma, both as a parent and an SMC member, wishes for the best for their students in the Ashramshalas.

\*names have been changed



# A FATHER WRITES LETTERS

Bairam\* is the proud father of a 7th grader who ranked 2nd in the Eklavya exams the year before. However, he had to climb a lot of steps to get his son's name out of the waiting list and finally secure admission. The COVID-19 crisis hasn't been easy on his son's education. He exclaims, "*Only children with mobiles are able to study. There are children who do not have money to buy mobiles*", lighting up the socio-economic positions impacting a child's education. He has complaints about the torn and incomplete set of books his child received. He also asserts that study notes have not been sent on the online groups made by the teachers. This worries him as the teachers were unable to complete the syllabus the previous year for the 6th, 8th, and 9th grades—barring 10th grade—only because, he believes, books were not available. He isn't happy with the Principal of the Ashramshala, whom he believes gives vague answers to pertinent questions. He ascertains that the principal is not working hard enough to take care of the children citing "*No orders from the higher-ups*" as an excuse. He recounts the Rs. 250 that he had given—like every other parent—for his child's books and uniform. However, He reaffirms that his son has not received any of it. Bairam has identified water to be another issue plaguing the school children, they are forced to fill buckets of water from a tanker placed outside and carry them to their respective washrooms—and to make matters worse, the children are expected to drink water from the same tanker. He is also furious about the electricity issues affecting the school.

\*names have been changed

During a previous visit to the school, his child informed him about a 15-day blackout, forcing them to live in the dark. This probably was the last straw for him, as a parent, to see his child continue facing issues— tormenting the Ashramshala—and not take any action.

Bairam is a School Management Committee Member from Shendegaon. However, he cannot find solace in the committee to solve any problems. Hence, as a father, he decided to take the matter into his own hands, writing letters en route to being sent to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, the Deputy Chief Minister, the education minister, the Tribal Minister, and other influential portfolios. It is not just his child's problems that he is writing for, but he has been noting down the difficulties faced by other students as well. All he wants is to replace the principal with someone more skilled and accountable or open an inquiry against him. He believes that there will be a transformation in the school functioning when people in power know about it. Bairam is sure that things would become better—for his child and other students in the school—particularly when the principal acts accountable, is ready to listen to the parent's concern, and the school administration expresses empathy for the student's growth within the walls of the Ashramshala. His weapon is his letter, and he is not willing to back down for the sake of his child's education.



# MY DAUGHTER NEEDS A PLACE TO HANG CLOTHES

Pratyusha\*, a mother of two children studying in an Ashramshala, has a painful story to tell. When asked about the facilities—or the lack thereof—in her daughter Ashramshala, she describes the dire situation of the school building. The building, she says, was damaged during the rains, and there have been no attempts by the authorities to fix it. Her worry is for the children, who are forced to continue living and studying in the damaged school building. The lack of a proper school building impacts the children, especially during the rainy season when they have no option to hang their clothes to dry—forcing them to take countless trips, trying to hang clothes and remove them in haste, before the wind or rains pin down the clothes.

As the children continue their residence in the school during the COVID-19, all she wants is for her daughter to not be bothered by decaying infrastructure. She recognizes her lack of education cannot be a barrier for her child from being educated. For that, she believes, the facilities in the school need to be kept intact. She was one amongst the parents of the children affected who voiced their concerns and anxieties to the school authorities and during other parent gatherings—however, she believes there is more that can be done. Pratiksha is unaware of the School Management Committee or its role in improving the facilities in school, yet she remains vocal for her daughter's sake.

*\*names have been changed*



# A P L E A T O I M P R O V E T H E Q U A L I T Y O F E D U C A T I O N

Forced to migrate due to a dam construction project, Bhuvan\* and his family now live in Pimpalgaon district in Nashik. Having been unable to study beyond 7-8th standard, he is determined that both his children receive good quality education. Both his children are enrolled in the Ashramshala, with the son studying in the eighth standard and the daughter studying in the fifth standard. He says that while the provisions relating to food and accommodation in the Ashramshala are adequate, he is deeply concerned about the quality of education in the Ashramshala. This is because even though his daughter studies in the fifth standard, her knowledge is not on par with that level of schooling. When asked why he thinks this is the case, he said that one of the reasons is that gaps in learning and knowledge occur due to constant transfers of teachers. The incoming teacher does not know where the outgoing teacher has left off with regard to the syllabus.

To resolve this, he thinks that there must be better communication and cooperation between teachers and headmasters. He also suggests that in order to ensure that there is progress in students' learning, the homework given to them must be regularly evaluated. Although he is not aware of the School Management Committee, on being informed about the existence of such a Committee and its role, he expressed an interest to be a member. He believes that education is of great importance and therefore, he is very interested in the progress of his children's education.

*\*names have been changed*

He said that he is unable to make regular visits to the school because he is an agricultural labourer who relies on daily wages. Even then, he ensures that he visits the school at least once a month to inquire about children's educational progress. He also adds that if he gets the opportunity, he would like to discuss with the teachers regarding improving the quality of education.



# LOCKDOWN IS THE ONLY OBSTACLE

Jairam\*, a farmer, is the father of two children, both of whom study at the Borvat Ashramshala. While one studies in the eighth standard, the other studies in the sixth standard. Post the lockdown following the pandemic, his children came back home from the school hostel. Since they had received books, their studies did not come to a halt. He says that they have adjusted well to studying at home. He is also part of the Ashramshala's School Management Committee (SMC). He has been in the Committee for the past three years, having become a member after receiving a three-day training at Nashik. He is very satisfied with the functioning of the Committee. He proudly declares that the Borvat school has been acknowledged for the work done by its SMC. He says that the meetings of the Committee are held every month, and if there is any improvement that is needed relating to the school then those are brought up.

According to him, all the parents regularly attend and participate in the discussions. He says that the Headmaster and the Secretary are very enthusiastic about making necessary arrangements to resolve the issues raised by the Committee. For instance, there used to be an issue regarding shortage of water during the months of April and May. This issue was taken up by the Committee and was eventually resolved. Jairam is also a very active member and takes a keen interest in the functioning of the Ashramshala.

*\*names have been changed*

It has been his practice to visit the school every week in order to make inspections. During these inspections, he speaks to the children to find out if they are facing any issues. In case of any issue, he raises it during the monthly meetings. However, he states that lockdown has severely affected the functioning of the SMC since no meeting has taken place during the past twelve months. As someone who is very enthusiastic about his role as an SMC member, he confidently asserts that lockdown is the only obstacle in his path.



# IT'S ALL ABOUT TRUST AND RELATIONSHIPS

*"They should feel that you are their person. Trust, trust is needed."*

A smiling man proud of his work proclaims, *"It does not matter when I call, they always come. If they have work, they take leave from work and then come."*

Baba T.\* is a headmaster of an Ashramashala in tribal Maharashtra. While the general notion about Ashramashala parents is that they are not involved in the proceedings or matters of the schools, Mr. T brings forward a remarkable case of his school where there is 100% participation. The reason behind it is less complicated than expected. Mr. T says trust and personal attachment are the keys to a parent's heart. They should consider you one of their own. Since he puts a lot of effort into maintaining relationships with the parents by personally inviting them to the meetings, festivals; he gets a bountiful reap: maximum (10 out of 12) participation by the parents. He also takes the help of the Gram Panchayats to solve problems unrelated to school but of importance to parents to gain that trust. Although he acknowledges that the shared language and context of some of his teachers provides an edge (over other Ashramshalas where teachers are not from the tribal background), Mr. T also focuses on and recommends listening. He believes that parents should be made comfortable to raise their concerns; they should be given charge to speak.

Another headmaster echoes his approach to involve parents.

\*names have been changed

Headmaster Mr. Mahi K.\* also holds relationships in high regard. In his school, the parents happily attend the meetings and share as much as they can. Although unlike Mr. T., his school sees only 50–60% of parental participation, in Ashramshala terms, even this is way above the normal range—where only 3 to 4 parents attend meetings. Mr. K. makes sure that parents feel at home when they come to school; refreshments are provided to parents. Since many parents are hesitant to speak up, he, with his staff, takes different approaches to ensure that they do not feel uncomfortable opening up.

*"So, what happens is that the parents shy away and hesitate in coming and talking to us. They ponder if they should or not. But when we give them chairs, make them sit, and explain to them that we are no different. We tell them we are alike. Then they open up and tell us their concerns."*

By making them sit on chairs at the same level as the staff, he tries to foster equality and oneness. Mr. K. visits their homes to maintain relationships and build trust.

*"We call them for meetings; we go to their villages and maintain our relationship with them. Even the students feel happy that we come to their homes. Parents also feel since the teacher is so involved, they should also engage with the school and us. If we do not go to them, they will not want to get involved in school matters. Our students are tribals, and so are the parents; we work on trust. A relationship must be maintained."*

By focusing on trust and relationships, both headmasters have built a community that makes the members accountable to involve and participate.

क कक्ष  
(शाविद्यालय)

राष्ट्रध्वज.



# SMC : A HAPPY STORY

*"Work has been done. You should come and see our school. Everything has been arranged well for the children. If there are any problems in the toilet, or if there is a leakage in the pipelines, or if there is no water for two days, such small expense works are immediately resolved by the SMC."*

School Management Committees (SMCs) are committees formed under government mandate to help improve the functioning of the schools.

In a recent interview with a parent, the positive changes made by SMC came to light. Mr. Kumar\* is a laborer from Bhiwandi, Maharashtra. Father of three, his youngest son goes to Ashramshala but is currently studying at home due to COVID-19. A self-determined parent involved in his children's education; Mr. S. considers SMCs to be a boon for Ashramshalas. Through his kids, he was introduced to SMC and its work. The teachers recognized him for his enthusiasm and interest in school matters, and then eventually, he joined SMC. He maintains that from small-scale work to emergency needs, SMC helps in everything. From pipeline issues to sanitation, SMC fixes anything that requires immediate attention. After becoming a member of SMC, he was able to resolve a lot of problems.

\*names have been changed

A frequent visitor at school, he is unable to go to Ashrmashala—these days—due to COVID-19 restrictions but he keeps in touch with the teachers and complains (if any) to them. He has already made a long list of improvements—hot water facility for girls, sanitary pad disposal machine, water tanks, et cetera—needed in the Ashramshalas. He believes, through SMC, they can bring the desired changes. Eagerly waiting for the school to reopen, says Mr. Kumar. at the end of the interview, inviting everyone to visit his school and experience the brilliant work done by SMC.



# A S T R A N G E N E W W O R L D

Over the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, things have been strange. The systems of the world as we know it have collapsed and we are having to adapt at a high rate, in a time where resources are already running low. In a low resource country like India, the current online mode of running various sectors has not been working very well. Most people do not have smartphones or technological literacy. Like all other organisations, Ashramshalas too had to go online this year. Classes and SMC meetings are supposed to be conducted online. But according to the testimony of parents, it has not been going very well.

*“None of the teachers is sending anything. Only children with mobiles are able to study. There are children who do not have money to buy mobiles.”*

SMC functioning too has taken a hit. Parent members have reported that online SMC meetings do not happen with the same regularity with which in-person SMC meetings used to happen. With the online method, accountability falls as more extraneous variables such as network, accessibility to technology, etc begin to factor in. One new parent member admitted that they had not been able to attend a single online meeting since they got elected. An older parent member said that no SMC work has been carried out in the past one year since the mode turned online. With headmasters and older parent members reporting that in-person SMC meetings used to happen at the frequency of even upto two meetings a month, it is obvious that SMC functioning has been reduced in its capacity due to the circumstances of the pandemic.

The teachers, though, are trying hard. According to one Headmaster of an Ashramshala, the government has announced a program named “Unlock Learning”. Under this program, teachers regularly visit the students’ homes. Books are provided to the students at home. But the online method continues.

*“We keep going once in a while. Our teachers would have to go everyday under the unlock learning program. And now, the students who are absent, for those students also the teachers go village to village.”*

The lack of the basic requirements of online work such as mobile network and internet connectivity are weak in the area. Most of the parents and headmasters we spoke too, complained of weak networks in their respective areas. When even phone calls are difficult to connect over, one wonders how the school administration is supposed to ensure smooth functioning of classes and SMC meetings over the internet.

कला अशी हवी की ती एकावेळी लाखोशी बोलू शकते .

चंगला नेकला चंगला मिर ही मेरी देखीतकले

खेला खेलेची मिरा हजे अजणे मिराची अजणकला



# THE TALE OF BOOKS

*"And my son did not get any books, last year and this year. Notes were not given as well."*

These are the appeals of an anxious father, Mr. Bhairava\*, whose son studies in 7th grade. His voice sounds rife with deep concern and stress. He explains that his son has not received the books that were supposed to be sent home from the Ashramshala. He worries about the immense deterioration in the quality of education provided over the pandemic year. Due to the social distancing protocols and lockdowns during the past year, classes have been made online and study material was supposed to be either sent online or directly to the homes of the students. This has been a matter of stress for many parents who, without the institutional help of schools, are struggling to ensure that their children get quality education in these times. Another father, Mr Ashwin\*, whose child studies in the same Ashramshala, agrees with Mr. Bhairava. He too exclaims that no books have been sent to the students, and the few books that were sent out are in a poor and tattered condition. He says:

*"We are not getting the books at all. They give us worn-out (old) books. ]...[ So many times, we have told them. But they give us old books, some that do not even have 10 pages."*

On the other hand, two other fathers, Mr. Sooraj\* and Mr. Sandeep\*, tell us that their children have received books on time from the school. The headmasters, too, say that they have sent the books out to the students' homes.

\*names have been changed

They told us that teachers have been regularly visiting the homes of students to guide them with their schoolwork and books have been handed to the students.

*“They also distributed some books. Teachers used to go again after two days to check on the students' homework, and would tell them what to do next.”*

Understanding the complexities of the pandemic in addition to the nuances of the socio-political situations of a tribal area, one can see the systems are porous. Is it possible that students in some schools received books and some schools didn't? One then wonders, where in the supply chain are the gaps and how do we fix them.



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