



# Parental Involvement Through School Management Committees in Government Ashram schools and EMRS

## REPORT ON INTENSIVE IMMERSION

16<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER, 2019 & 6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> JANUARY, 2020

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## BACKGROUND

In 2019, Saajha partnered with the Tribal Development Department, Government of Maharashtra to improve parental participation and to strengthen School Management Committees in Ashramshalas across the state. Over the next three years, we want to reimagine the idea of parental involvement in residential schools and to ensure that the voices of tribal parents are heard in the state's education system.

Before we embarked on our interventions, we wanted to develop a deep and comprehensive understanding of the Ashramshala system – specifically the role of parents and SMCs – by engaging with all the stakeholders viz principals, teachers, parents, warden and students. Thus, we undertook an immersion programme wherein our team stayed in Ashramshalas and conducted wide-ranging interviews, workshops and activities with an objective systematically view the idea of parental involvement and the role of SMCs in these spaces.

This report will delve into our observations and inferences from the visit, while also identifying some best practices across schools. Based on our findings, we have also listed some suggestion that could be implemented through our intervention for achieving an overall transformation of Ashramshalas in the state.

## METHODOLOGY

In the month of December & January respectively eight teams from Saajha set out for a 5 day immersive experience in Ashramshalas - the aim of the immersion was to have a first-hand experiential learning of the ground realities of the tribal residential schools.



Some of the salient features of the immersion programme are listed below:

- A three-phased strategy for understanding the ground realities was adopted comprising school visits, residential immersion program followed by focussed parent interviews through telephonic conversations
- Two immersion sessions across 16-20<sup>th</sup> December & 6-7<sup>th</sup> January were done by four and four teams for five and two days respectively by eight teams consisting of two members each.
- The teams interacted closely with the students, teachers and HMs of the schools, having discussions focused on the attitudes of the stakeholders, conditions of the schools, functioning of the schools, parental participation and primarily, the working of the SMCs Focused group discussion with teachers, Life-skill sessions with Adolescents, interviews and

participation in day-to-day processes were our method to learn about the schools. - this essentially called for the team to reside in schools for the entirety of the immersion. Our objective was to get closer to the life and challenges of teachers, staff and students of Ashram Shalas.

- 24 Ashramshalas across five Project Offices (PO) of Nashik, Kalwan, Jawhar, Shahapur & Dahanu were covered. Out of these schools, our team stayed in 19 of them
- Parent calling sessions were done with 200 parents - around 75 parents could be contacted including in-depth conversations with 32 parents with calls lasting for more than 30 mins. The calls focused on how parents perceived Ashramshalas, what are their expectations from the schools and the changes they expect to see in the child's education.



## OBSERVATIONS AND INFERENCES

Based on the school visits, immersion and parent calling sessions, we were able to identify a few key issues that we felt were crucial to the functioning of Ashramshalas and were areas where parental involvement could yield significant results.



### Water as an all-encompassing issue

India recognizes the right to safe and adequate water as an integral part of the right to life – enshrined in Article 21 of our Constitution. Unsurprisingly, in all our school-based interactions, water emerged as a crucial issue – being articulated by students and staff across all the schools we visited.

In most of the schools we visited, staff and student accessed drinking water from different sources. Unavailability of adequate and safe water also lead to unsanitised toilets in schools as well as detrimental cleaning and washing habits in children. For example, children in Nyahala Ashramshala have access to only two sources of water; this creates hindrance for over 300+ students to have access to adequate water within the stipulated period of time that they are

allowed. The warden also reported that that younger students often leave the taps open which leads to wastage of the water.

## After-School Learning

While efforts by the government have helped significantly in providing a holistic learning environment to students in schools, the area of after-school learning remains somewhat unexplored. There is a need to create an equally fulfilling physical and emotional space within the Ashramshala to facilitate post-school learning for students. For instance, when we asked a student in Pendharghol Ashramshala about his expectations from the school, he said wanted a place to read in the evening as his hostel room become crowded. During our stay back in the Ashramshalas, we brightly-lit reading spots could be very helpful for students. One such example was Chimbipada Ashramshala led by Mr. Ahire in Shahpur PO, who had installed halogen lights across the school campus.

We observed that there was a shared consensus among some of the HMs, teachers and the community members surrounding the school that teachers staying back in the school would significantly enhance the entire learning environment.



## Gender and Inclusion in Schools

The confidence and openness with which most female students from Ashram Shalas discussed about their awareness and challenges related to menstruation was both empowering and inspiring. More or less 100% adoption of sanitary pads were noticed across schools. The only challenge female students articulated was related to disposal - either the incinerator is not at a comfortable location or it operates only during certain hours.



Open areas in the school like the playground were more accessible to male students than the female students of the school. We observed the space being shared by all students only in three of the schools we visited. Information about the Vishakha Committee guidelines or any form of safeguarding committee for children were largely absent in the schools.

## Emotional Development in Ashram Shalas

Research shows that when children have strong relationships with caring adults, they are more likely to be engaged at school and more motivated to succeed academically. Ensuring that children get care-time with adults seems like a challenge. Through our immersion we found certain challenges and opportunities that could help us build a caring environment in the Ashram Shalas.

- 70% of the students reported meeting their parents or someone from their family twice a month - mostly on Sundays or during festivals
- No one-on-one time with teachers or superintendents. Usually students go in a group to talk to them and there is an interaction only once a week
- In most of the schools, we found that there were two to three teachers with whom students felt connected and close
- Most of the parents are alumni of Ashram Shalas.



## BEST PRACTICES

Through the journey, we were able to recognize some fantastic best practices in schools, which are suggestive for all schools to practice.

- Children brushing twice a day
- School participating in morning yoga
- Holding effective study hour
- Having music hour for children
- Use of better lighting
- Daily practice of sports - for both girls and boys
- At least 1-2 teachers staying back in schools everyday
- Girl students being aware of menstrual hygiene, menstrual health
- Involvement of local representatives in school on-goings
- Documentation, good account keeping and financial management of SMCs
- Engaging community for effectiveness and accountability
- Parents crowd-funding digital classroom transformation observed in Kalwan which is highly commendable and appreciative.
- Highly motivated teachers being proactive
- Students being tidy and cleaning their own spaces
- Local art being used (like Warli paintings)
- Cold call, SMS, circular, home visits, schools apply a three way approach in communicating with the parents
- Teachers being equipped with the emergency protocol for health
- Good support given by administration

## INSIGHTS FROM PARENT CALLING

We called around 200 parents of students and could connect to 75 parents from across the 5 POs asking questions about how they feel about the school, the teachers whether they participate in PTMs and their awareness about SMCs and what they felt could be improved about the schools. The following observations were noted regarding what the Parents expected from the school for their wards

1. Functional Computer Labs & handholding of students for using the same.
2. Completion of syllabus for 10<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> classes.
3. Further career guidance post 10<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> standards.
4. Good quality playground and exercise session by the school.
5. Absence of Boys toilet.
6. Extra Classes on holidays.

### Parent participation in SMCs and/or PTMs

- Across the 5 POs, parent awareness regarding the existence of PTMs & SMCs were 76% (57 parents) and 18% (14 parents).
- 48% (36) & 9% (6) of the parents have attended a PTM and SMC respectively, at least once.
- 37% parents attend PTMs regularly.

The calling sessions proved to be quite an eye opener of sorts whereby majority of the parents indicated their prime concern regarding the education of their wards wherein they conveyed that majority of their discussion with the school and/or teachers revolved around their respective ward's educational performance, though no concrete details regarding their idea of education could be ascertained - it varied considerably with a few parents deeming education as the ability to be able to read and write with others associating education as a tool to obtain employment.

There were inhibitions amongst parents attending PTMs in communicating freely with the teachers, wherein they conveyed that the same set of parents usually communicate and other parents do not feel free to speak due to their own reservations.

## SUGGESTIONS

Currently the image of SMCs amongst all ashram Shalas is primarily and only limited to SMC funds, there is a need to re-imagine the SMC to go beyond mere budget management in the minds of teachers, HMs, parents. With respect to the fund, SMCs can and should do a lot more than effective utilisation of funds.

Through our immersive conversation, Saajha is able to highlight two broad areas where SMCs can impact directly or indirectly as mentioned below, apart from mere utilization of the fund. We must account for the intensive administrative load that schools have apart from teaching-learning and the scope of work mentioned below are recommended post sensitizing the workload of the stakeholders.

- We can support the SMCs in ensuring that everyone gets clean safe drinking water.
- SMCs can work on having a water utilization training, RO facilities in school, holding a water awareness campaign for children (here they will learn to conserve water), having multiple storage facilities for water for use.
- Creating student role models for students to have a relatable channel for aspirations and ambitions.
- In order for children to have access to knowledge about careers, SMCs can create a forum to engage with alumni and individuals from varying careers from the community.
- The SMC in the school can create a pool of parent volunteers( can be either SMC member or any non-member parent) who live closer to the school so that even students who are otherwise unable to meet their parents can get some time to spend with adults who are in the stature of their parents.
- Creating an agenda centering on girl child well being, this can cover aspects on space, toilets, menstrual health, sports, etc.
- SMCs can form a subcommittee infrastructural maintenance issues roping in the HM, SMC chairman and deputy chairman as members of the subcommittee.

The following are some of the broad areas that Saajha has identified for future interventions with SMCs:



## Enhancing student safety, happiness, emotional wellbeing and cognitive development

Ashramshalas have the basic provision of education but what gets side-lined in the whole chase of running classes is students well being, which can be impactful on children on their education. This is a space where SMCs can work on student safety, happiness and well being, the impact of this can be multifold in varying aspects of the school.

From the immersion, Saajha was able to see (not fully but evidently) that students well being can be nurtured through an increase time spent with adults, in most schools children spend on average one hour with an adult a month but conversations lacked quality conversations.

Schools can create a better learning environment through effective space management. Most schools lack adequate infrastructure, especially with regards to hostels, in such constraint's schools can tap into existing schools spaces for holding different activities.

Overcrowded rooms during evening study hour is not entirely effective. In Shahpur, for instance, Ahire Sir from Chimbipada realized that utilizing the open space in the school instead of overcrowded hostel rooms for revision hours can be fruitful. He went on to install lights in these open spaces and has children sit under these light spots for evening studies.

Sometimes due to the very nature of the jobs/occupations of the parents of the children in Ashram shalas does not make it possible for them to visit students frequently. Ravi Dokey a specially abled child in Thanapada with 20% burn injury in the limbs and elbows longs to meet his parents, whom he last spoke to 6 months back. The SMC as mentioned above can create a pool of parent volunteers so that every child gets adequate one-on-one adult time.

Even though empirical research says that physical touch of parents goes a long way in forming associations/interconnections in brain regions associated with empathy, critical thinking and problem solving, perhaps for the time being what Ravi would be glad with is some one-on-one time with a significant adult perhaps once in a month.

## **Priority availability and utilisation of clean, safe water as a priority agenda for SMC**

In majority of the schools visited across the POs, a clear and alarming issue was access to clean and safe water. Open defecation, un-sanitized toilets, unclean grounds, can be prevented in becoming a norm.

SMCs must work on enabling a system of processes in school where every child has access to clean and safe water. This will cater to providing a hygienic environment for children which consequently will impact their health

For example, children in Nyahala Ashramshala have access to only two sources of water, this creates hindrance for over 300+ students to have access to adequate water within the stipulated period of time they are allowed to.

There is a stronger stress on addressing water related demands of having water available in toilets, due to lack of water children tend to opt for open defecation as the toilets become unhygienic for use, another branch of water issues is children must have access to hot water, most schools had

non-functional solar water heaters and geysers, SMCs can look into an immediate fix on these equipments and have children use hot water, especially during the winter season.

In context to school staff practices, teachers had access to distilled water, different to that of what students consume, SMCs can create a provision for access to clean water for everyone and remove the system of differentiated water consumption.

## **Empowering teachers and staff by simplifying data processes**

While empowering students and enabling a safer space is key, we've also recognized that empowering teachers and staff is also important for a more nuanced improvement in schools.

While teachers are burdened to deal with copious amounts of data, the SMC can branch out to them by simplifying data collecting and data analysis processes, consolidating existing sporadic academic and health data, having training session on wellness and mental health, providing support to teachers, identifying and recognizing champion teachers amongst the many are other ways SMCs can strengthen teachers and staff, this will further add value to the relations shared amongst them.

There was an observation that younger staff is seen to be more proactive, SMCs can tap into how such individuals can be at the forefront of empowering teachers and staff.

With multiple spaces to work on, where SMCs can play a key role in improving on these areas, can empower schools and community to have a more holistic engagement in school improvement.

## **Health & Hygiene in Ashram Schools**

Based on the immersion visits, what was really heart rendering to see was the awareness regarding the importance of hygiene amongst all the ashram shalas especially amongst girls regarding menstrual hygiene with almost 100% adoption of sanitary pads at all the ashramshalas.

In order to build on this awareness and take it to the next step minor steps such as that of installation of incinerators at accessible locations, placing garbage bins in common areas and

hostels could be done and centralised garbage collection at regular intervals will go a long way to ensuring the premises both at classrooms and especially hostels remain hygienic.

Sick rooms were present in almost all of the ashram shalas and in schools such as that of Thanapada the sick room had much better infrastructure than the nearest wards of the RHC in Mhasrul, with presence of even oxygen cylinders and minor equipment for anesthesia.

Since PHC/RHCs were present in a radius of 10-20 kms, the SMC members can take a collective resolution to request the health department to conduct a bi-tri weekly check up in the ashram shalas especially for female students with anemic tendencies who essentially do not need regular follow up.



## A Healthy Diet for a Healthy Mind

Food obtained by the schools from the central kitchen were liked by the students and was nutritious in nature with adequate quantity.

All of the ashram shalas had a wholesome diet with atleast one portion of fresh fruits, seasonal vegetables and proteins in one of the four meals served during the whole day.

The spacing between diets in ashramshalas of Nashik PO, especially the duration between breakfast and very early lunch at 10.30 results in children remaining hungry for a significant part of the active hours of the day and does to an extent impact their ability to concentrate on studies.

It would be great if the quality and quantity of food served from the central kitchen could be replicated across all the ashram shalas.



## Maintenance of Existing Infrastructure

Most of the schools we visited had adequate infrastructure. In certain schools we saw new academic building which could have been used as reading-spots for children. However, because of security and management reasons the staff avoided using that space. With minor alteration, the academic

building could also be used as after school reading rooms or new spots could be identified and build.

Majority of schools have spent their SMC grant on decorating the building. However, these decorations was primarily seen in the academic block and that too concentrated around the principal's room. Building the hostel room bright with Teaching Learning Aids, good lighting and vibrant walls could also be encouraged.

## ANNEXURE I

### Immersion schools:

School Names	Project Office
Baadgi	Nashik
Borwat	Nashik
Vaitarna	Nashik
Thanapada	Nashik
Chankapur	Kalwan
Dahindule	Kalwan
Ganore	Kalwan
Mani	Kalwan
Dalwat	Kalwan
Nyahale	Jawhar
Gonde	Jawhar
Karhe	Jawhar
Vinval	Jawhar
Dehere	Jawhar
Pendharghol	Shahapur
Chimbipada	Shahapur

School Names	Project Office
Kulhe	Shahapur
Sasane	Shahapur
Shenve	Shahapur
Khambale	Dahanu
Rankol	Dahanu
Mahalakshmi	Dahanu
Tawa	Dahanu
Urse	Dahanu