

Saajha

Annual Report

2021-2022



**Creating Parental Partnerships for
Better Education**

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The Ground Reality

As the second wave loomed over our country, schools continued to remain shut. Learning from the comfortable environment of the classroom was pushed to the online learning during COVID. With barely any access to learning tools and lack of support from parents it was difficult for children to cope with academics.

The role of parents has often been ignored in Govt Schools. Parents in communities we work with were left without tools or support to help their children in the learning process. With the pandemic, it became more important for parents to offer support to children in their learning.

While some children did have access to smartphones during this time, there was still a large group who did not have the sufficient resources for online learning. We observed a sharp divide with regards to access to digital learning resources. If children had smartphones there was not enough internet or the home environment was not conducive enough for the child to continue learning. About 50% children studying in Grade V cannot read text of Grade level II in Government Schools, which highlighting the lack of foundational literacy skills in children. This further worsened due to the pandemic.

Studies from institutions such as Azim premji and surveys like National Achievement survey have reported a sharp decline in learning levels of children. Especially in the foundational skills of children such as in reading, writing and engaging in simple mathematics.



On an average 92% of children have lost at least one specific language ability from the previous year across all classes*



The National Achievement Survey assessed approx 34 lac students from 720 districts of the country – this included both rural and urban areas. The survey was last conducted in the year 2017.

The following overall findings came out of the survey:

Only **45%** found online learning joyful

24% students did not have access to digital devices.

38% faced difficulty carrying out learning activities at home.

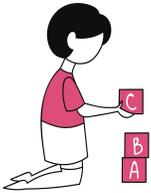
80% said they learn better at school with the help of peers.

While parents wanted to be of help in the child's learning, they did not have the right tools or skills to intervene in their learning. Reports suggest that parental participation can lead to greater learning outcomes for children. Hence, for parents to participate in their child's learning, we supported them by guiding them on home learning, providing access to digital learning resources, reaching out to parents and children who don't have access to the internet via our whatsapp bot and helpline.

A brief about the types of support we offer to parents:-



To ensure children show an improvement in their learning levels, we worked on providing access to various ed-tech resources for them to explore. To enable children to effectively use these tools, Saajha worked as support platform. Our team offered call support to assist children to use the apps and also provided access to smartphones for some families.



The focus of our program is to ensure that parents are engaged with their children's learning and we believe that it must start in their developmental years. Our objective for young children 3-8 year old's was for them to have an increased parental engagement, which could better prepare them for school learning. To achieve this we partnered with an ed-tech application called, Top Parent. Parents could access learning materials on the application.



We built a network of champion parents from within the community under our Saajhedhar program. The champion parents joined the program to offer support to other fellow parents from within the community. The champion parents from within the community are identified for an year long program and are guided on using tech tools and on skills such as public speaking, data collection and communication.



We believe that technology is a driving force for impact and can help us connect with parents. At Saajha we are committed to delivering digital solutions for parents that are user-friendly, affordable and reliable. Currently, we have a WhatsApp chatbot, dedicated parent helpline and mobile applications for parental support.

Program outcomes

21,990
Users

Total no of users actively using the bot with a grievance redressal rate of 98.66%

51
Saajhedars

Saajhedars joined as part of the Saajhedar program, and reached out to 22,516 parents through the Whatsapp bot and helpline.

7,86,968
Messages

Total number of messages exchanged with parents on the WhatsApp bot.

7,200
Parents

Parents supported through outgoing calls for an approximate duration of 3,92,548 hours

Parent Support at Saajha

Parents acted as the key learning facilitators when schools were shut due to the pandemic. In the year 2020, parents assumed an added responsibility to ensure the education of their children continues in such critical situation. The year 2021 did not provide any respite. As the second wave hit the nation, the schools remained shut and education continued at homes.

Saajha, building on its experience of providing support to parents, created a parent to parent support system. We realised that parents did not have resources that could give them access to information about learning. Hence Saajha designed and implemented programs which enabled parents to support other parents in the community. The details of all programs are given below-



Parent support in Delhi

Parents in Delhi faced significant challenges due to the constant changes- Even when schools reopened briefly, they were concerned about child's safety and lacked awareness about exams to be conducted. Parents needed a community that could listen to them, understand their challenges, and support them. Saajha, through its parent to parent support program provided a platform where they could share their challenges and receive solutions, recommendations.

We worked with 3,150 parents of students in classes 1- 8 intensively. We developed two models to provide support remotely to parents. The first model focused on a system of community members talking to parent through outgoing & incoming calls. Saajha also engaged with parents via SMS & Whatsapp.

Direct to Home Program



Parents reaching out to Saajha to seek support to support their children in learning

Saajha providing solutions parents to increase their involvement in their child's education

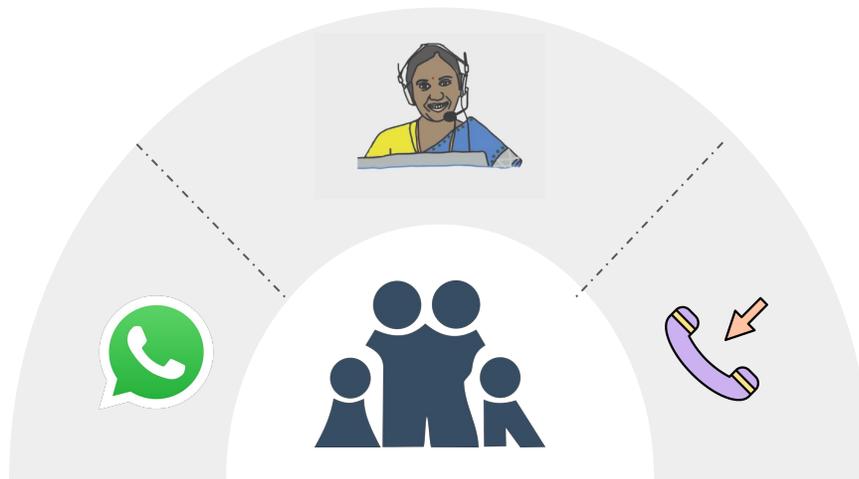
Children attain appropriate stage to achieve foundational literacy and numeracy

Parents who received continuous support	Supported through Outgoing Calls	Supported through Incoming Calls
3,000	7,200	2589

Our Solution:-

The parent support team spoke to parents once every 6 to 8 weeks

The WhatsApp bot assisted parents to access learning related information



Parents could reach out to the parent support team for required support

Activities were shared with parents during the period between calls. These activities allowed parents to do them with kids and ensured that they would spend time together. These activities were shared via WhatsApp bot. Two examples of activities are given below -


माता-पिता का साथ हो, बच्चों का विकास हो।



चलिए जानते हैं, अपने बच्चों से अपने बारे में। अपने बच्चे से मम्मी या पापा के लिए एक चिट्ठी लिखने को कहें।


माता-पिता का साथ हो, बच्चों का विकास हो।



इस हफ्ते बच्चों को बताएँ, पुराने समय में कठपुतली के माध्यम से कहानियाँ पेश की जाती थी। घर में रखे व्यर्थ सामान का उपयोग कर बच्चे से कठपुतली बनवाएं और कोई भी कहानी प्रस्तुत करने को कहें।

Our model was focused on achieving two key objectives: improving the learning level of children, and also on increasing the time parents spent with their children. From our endline assessments were able to measure a few impact points that helped us achieve our objectives:-

- According to our endline survey with children in Grade V and above, around 53.5% who could not do a simple 2-digit addition improved in their learning level.
- Our support made parents more likely to create a timetable. From 200 households that were covered during our assessment ~85% were shown to create a timetable for their children.
- 90% of the parents and children were together able to undertake at least one learning activity together.

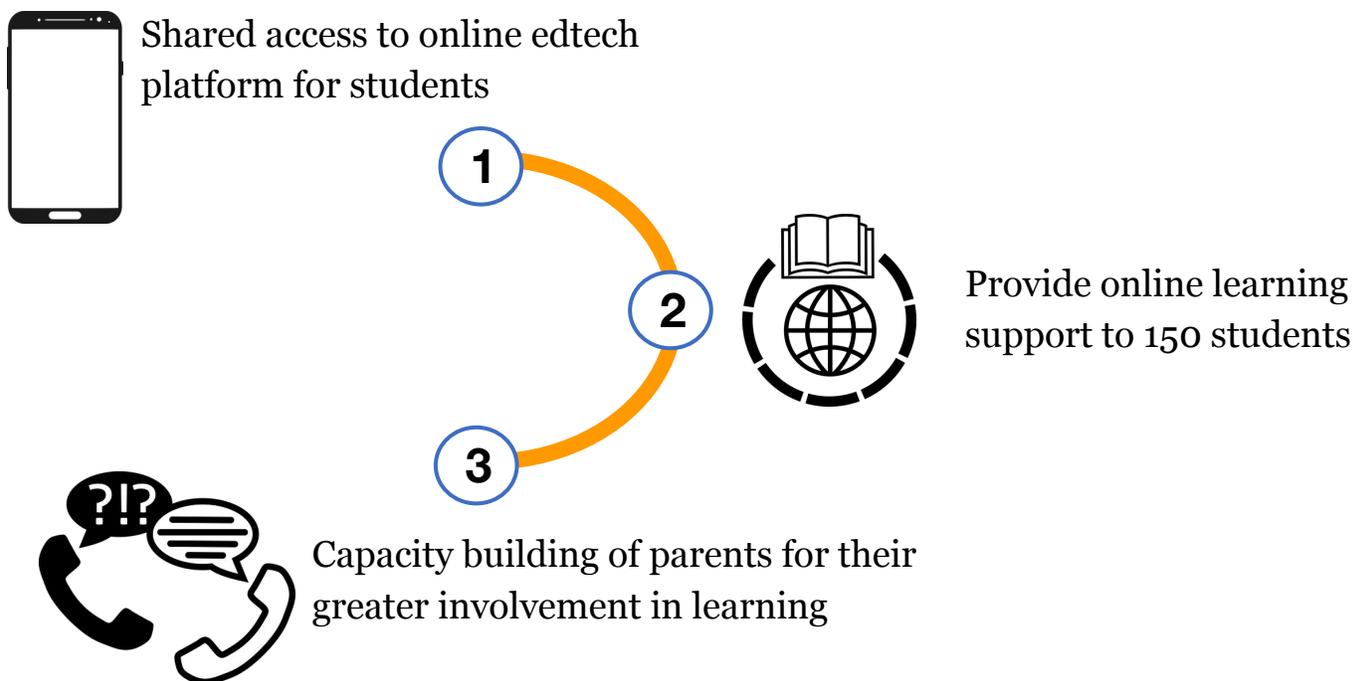


Parent Support through providing Smartphones

Through our interventions and engagements with parents and children we recognized two key challenges that they were facing in order to achieve class appropriate learning levels.

- Access to ed-tech solutions for children that can offer additional learning support.
- A need to strengthen parental support for children in order to support their learning requirements.

Our solution was designed keeping these two challenges in mind, and hence was implemented in the following manner:-



During the pandemic around 46% students in Delhi did not have access to any electronic devices to attend the online classes. Due to which many students have faced learning difficulties. This model allowed students to attend online classes, have access to edtech solutions that could help them with overcoming learning loss.

Our objective was for children to get access to learning and get supported from their parent through the process. Students were provided access to an ed-tech solution. They were encouraged to understand the concepts through the videos and practice tests. To help parent support their children, we reached out to them every month to guide them on ways through which they could offer support and understand the progress of their child.

We achieved the following outcomes:

Access to Technology

We were able to provide access to about 300 smartphones for children as a result of which they could continue their learning online. This also helped the student's siblings, as they were also able to use the smartphones for their learning.

Learning Level

- Around 80% children were either at the highest level or improved a level.
- A majority of the children whom we supported either maintained the highest level or improved by a level in Hindi. More girls were at a higher level as compared to boys (61%vs54%)
- A majority of children maintained the highest level or improved by a level in Mathematics.

Parental Involvement

- When parents supported their children through academics, we saw a significant reduction in the percentage of children who could not do simple 2-digit addition.
- An improvement in the learning level was observed for children who were engaged in a longer conversation and interaction time with their parents.

The models of virtual support to parents developed by Saajha focused on improving foundational literacy and numeracy of students. At the end of the year, we could see our efforts creating impact and were also able to gain an understanding of the challenges parents face when it comes to using digital learning solutions. We also realised that when parents take part in activities along with children, we see positive outcomes in their academic performance.



Parent Support through Top Parent Application

The Top Parent App is a free of cost app that helps parents get guidance on better parenting techniques, teaching children essential life skills and learning material for their 3-8 year olds. Top Parent Learning application gives access to Teaching Videos, Quizzes, and Kids Learning EdTech Apps.



Saajha collaborated with Top Parent in July 2021 with an objective to grow the parent's engagement towards their child's learning before they start going to school.

1,800 families identified from three districts North, East and South-west Delhi for the app usage. They were divided into three categories- Pure control, Non-research and Research



Top Parent App on Google Play

Results from the project

Call Duration Wise-Data

- Parents who talked to us for 0-30 Seconds doing 27% Hindi worksheets.
- Parents who talked to us for 1-5 minutes are doing 61% Hindi worksheets



IVRS Data

- Parents who listened the IVRS >20 sec they are using app or doing 66% Hindi worksheets
- Families who are listening to IVRs for more than 30 sec are doing 71% Hindi worksheets

Community Led Program



Saajhedar Shiksha Kei

In addition to the virtual support that Saajha was offering, we also laid emphasis on in-person connections to get a better understanding of the families. We along with partner organisations, Dasra and Top Parent initiated programs that could help us work directly with parents from within the communities.



In partnership with “Dasra”, we initiated a four-month partnership pilot project from November 2021 to March 2022.

Mothers from our community were invited to take the role of a Saajhedar. They then engaged with the parents in their community through home visits to encourage parents to participate in children’s education.



51

A pool of 51 saajhedars joined our team and were provided guidance on technology, communication and data collection under the Saajhedar program.

During the home visit, Saajhedars provided Saajha’s WhatsApp chat bot and helpline number to the parents so that they can ask their queries related to child learning in future.



A step-wise approach to our onboarding process

Application received from interested participants

Invite for program orientation



Reach out to the existing network of parents and volunteers through WhatsApp

One round of telephonic conversation / Expectation setting

Weekly sessions and home visits

The top three priorities for the Saajhedars during home visits were:



Understand the challenges and needs of parents in child learning and also try to provide solutions

Understanding the household better and the demographic of the place where the parents reside.



Suggest activities that the parents and children can go together in order to improve foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

Parents reached out to by our Saajhedars through a one-time home visit and whatsapp bot helpline



22,516



30% registered for further support on the bot



51 mothers Empowered on skills such as communication, tech, and data collection



Group photograph from the Saajhedar orientation.

Our top two priorities for the upcoming year would be:-

To reach out to almost 50,000 parents through capacity and knowledge building of 150 Saajhedars by next financial year.

Introduce tech based training platform for the participants so that they can attend the sessions as per their suitable time.



Technology at Saajha

At Saajha we believe that human interactions leveraged through technology have immense potential to connect with parents in a manner that is user-friendly, affordable, and accessible for parents. Our technology is built over various platforms that include a Whatsapp Bot, Calling helpline and mobile-based applications.

Saajha's WhatsApp Bot

The chatbot has been created as a one stop solution for parents to access any information related to their child's education. Parents can share their queries and receive solutions. The WhatsApp bot has been playing a pivotal role in our efforts to reach out to parents and assist them for greater learning outcomes for their children.



Parents have to register for Saajha's WhatsApp bot services. The registration process is very simple, requiring only three buttons for parents to click. The process has been simplified so that parents can access the bot with ease.

Once parents register, they gain access to contains related to information related to school, worksheets, syllabus and books, admission, result, exam dates, competitions, activities parents can do with their children at home.

Saajha has collaborated with other organisations such as Pratham and Room to Read to curate specific content for parents. We have also been looking for more integration with other resources.

Insights-

21,990

Total users

7,86,968

Total messages exchanged

98.66%

Grievance redressal rate

Saajha's Calling Helpline



Saajha साझेदार शिक्षा के

साझा की सुविधाओं के बारे में जानने के लिए हमारे व्हाट्सएप और हेल्पलाइन नंबर से संपर्क करें

- साझा के व्हाट्सएप पर जुड़ने के लिए इस नंबर 011-71279787 पर "Hi" लिख कर भेजें
- साझा के प्रतिनिधि से बात करने के लिए इस नंबर पर 011-43060755 कॉल कर सकते हैं

साझा के व्हाट्सएप पर जाने के लिए कोड स्कैन करें

The Calling Helpline is a unique initiative for parent support. Our team members reach out to parents through regular call support to address queries, resolve challenges and for learning related support to children. The calling helpline offers both incoming and outgoing call support.

Saajha's Helpline and Whatsapp bot number.

Saajha Connect Application (Mobile)

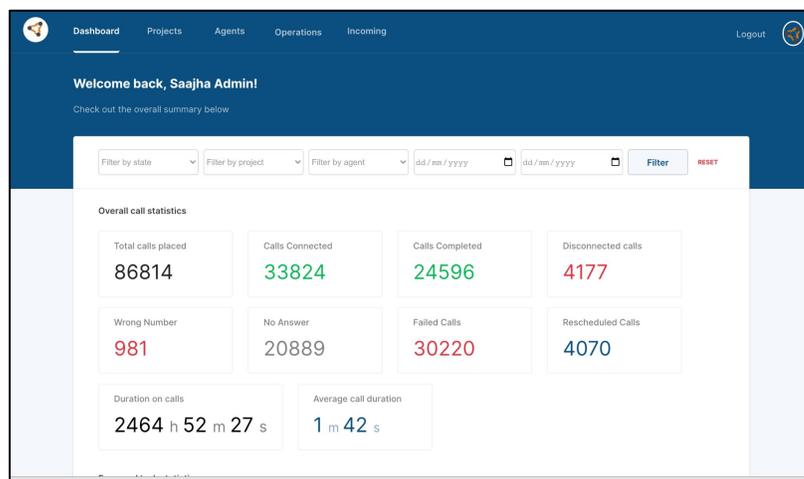
The technology team developed the Saajha connect app for Saajha's parent support team to reach out to parents. The app has the following features-

1. Outbound Calls : Making outbound service and self calling
2. Calling dashboard : status of calls done by the parent support team member
3. Call Logs : Time/dates and details of calls with filters
4. Call Status : Active/Rescheduled/Disconnect
5. Forms : Additional information in form
6. Other settings : Language/Call record controls

The app has been helpful to connect with parent effectively and in a timely manner. The app does face some technical issues, though the technology team is always striving to create better versions and make the calling process hasslefree.

Saajha connect web application

The web application of Saajha connect has been created to manage the application. This web application helps the team to manage data, work on processes.



Kaleyra

Saajha interacts with many parents and provides them solutions and services. But Saajha also focuses on taking consent from parents before providing them services. We respect parents' privacy hence taking consent is a priority for us. Kaleyra helps to collect the consent through SMS and WhatsApp bot. This tool is also used to send and receive SMSs.

Data Management and creating new technologies at Saajha-

- The technology team at Saajha also looks at data management. Saajha is looking to onboard partners to manage data and build data dashboards.
- Saajha has partnered with Platform Commons for research and building new technologies.

The role of technology in Saajha's interventions is going to keep on increasing. Hence Saajha is looking at building new technologies that will help us to support parents efficiently.

Community Stories

Stories of change, commitment and resilience, stories that leave us inspired.



Parents commit to Quality Learning



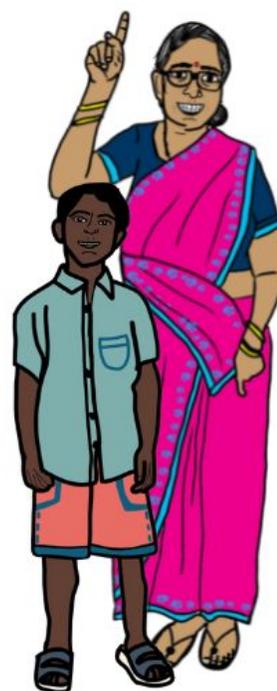
Minazuddin ji* lives in Okhla and has six children. The eldest two daughters are in 12th, and the next in 8th, 6th, and 3rd classes respectively. Minazuddin Ji shared that there are two smartphones, one of which is not owned by him and is on loan. All five children study on one phone since Minazuddin Ji takes the other one with him to work. He says that it is difficult for all five of his children to study using just one phone. When our facilitator asked him about it, he shared that he did not have information about hard copies of worksheets being available at the school. He also said that he wasn't able to buy enough balance for children to attend online classes.

Saajha offered to provide technology and learning support to Minazuddin Ji's children and he was elated to receive it. Minazuddin Ji told our facilitator that he was extremely grateful for the support. All his children are able to study and at least three of them are able to attend their online classes smoothly. He also shared that it has empowered the children's mothers to stay connected with the children's studies. Minazuddin Ji also regularly keeps a track of his children's learning on the iPrep app. Our facilitator was happy to hear this testimony of empowerment.

*Names have been changed to protect identities

Building a hopeful future

“7-year-old Rehan* helps his mother with the housework during the day, when his father comes back, he patiently sits next to him to hear about his day. Rehan often wonders how it might be to step out of the house and play with friends his age like other children in his area. Rehan's parents have planned that after a few years, he would join his father as a daily wage worker. Our Saajhedar reached out to the family during their field visit support. After speaking to Rehan, we realised he had never been to school and was keen on going to one like other children his age. Rehan's parents felt differently, he never displays an interest in academics and neither would they be able to support his academics as they had no information about admission processes etc. Our Saajhedar after speaking with his parents, helped them realise what Rehan was missing from his life and encouraged the parents to get the child admitted to a school and introduced them to home-based activities that they could engage in together”



*Names have been changed to protect identities

Finding a Purpose through Adversity

Anjali* enjoyed studying and wanted to pursue higher education, she always hoped to be self-reliant and independent. However, her circumstances changed when she had to drop out of school to take care of her mother. Her parents also weren't doing well financially and decided to get her married early. Anjali now lives with her husband and in-laws in Uttam Nagar. Who supports her dreams, and encourages her to work towards making her own identity.



She met Saajha's team member, Mrs Neeti in her colony who was conducting a field visit. After closely observing her during data collection Anjali felt intrigued and reached out to her to find out more about Saajha. Speaking to Neeti motivated her, She appreciated the work and wanted to be a part of the change-making process. Anjali enjoys interacting with children and is passionate about ensuring children get access to learning. She feels that providing information to parents about the value of schooling and education can transform many lives. She is enjoying her learning journey at Saajha and feels that she has her own independent identity in her community and family now.

*Name of the Saajheddar has been changed to protect their identity

Becoming a Well-informed Parent and a Saajheddar

Rekha* resides in Krishna colony, in her family women are not allowed to go outside to work, so Rekha started teaching children at home to provide for her children. She is passionate about providing access to education, so she makes sure to charge less fees for her classes.

She heard about Saajha at an Anganwadi meeting, she met a few Saajhedars here and was very curious about the work they did. She joined Saajha because she felt as a parent she did not have enough information about school or children but Saajha is bridging this gap and providing a platform. Here she learnt how to connect with parents better and provide them with information. She recalls her first field visit when she felt nervous and uncomfortable about talking to new people, however, she was determined to take that step forward. Practising this regularly helped her build her confidence She feels parents who aren't literate need access to such information much more because it gets very difficult for them otherwise.

Since joining Saajha, Rekha has received guidance on skills such as communication, technology and data collection. Personally, she has gained more confidence and is financially independent now. She is hopeful about her and her children's future



*Name of the Saajheddar has been changed to protect their identity

Achievements and Awards

Saajha is honoured and humbled to be recognized for the work we do with parents and children. This recognition encourages our team to work harder towards our vision and commitment.

- Ashoka | Changemaker Fellowship
- Social Impact Fellowship | The Agency Fund
- Echoing Green Fellowship
- Nasscom Social Innovation Award
- Azim Premji University
 - Sneh-Setu| Case story published in the [stories of change publication](#) (annexure)

Our Partners



Financial audit

Particulars	Note No.	As at 31st March 2022	As at 31st March 2021
<u>I. EQUITY AND LIABILITIES</u>			
1 Shareholders' Funds			
(a) Share Capital	3	100000	100000
(b) Reserves & Surplus	4	20533258	18731656
2 Non-Current Liabilities			
(a) Deferred Tax Liabilities	5	-	-
3 Current Liabilities			
(a) Other Current Liabilities	6	523444	292307
TOTAL		21156702	19123963
<u>II. ASSETS</u>			
1 Non-Current Assets			
(a) Fixed Assets			
-Tangible Assets	7	183567	438548
(b) Long-Term Loans and Advances	8	11090	111090
1. Current Assets			
(a) Trade Receivables	9	-	-
(b) Cash & Cash Equivalents	10	20,062,034	18002763
(c) Short Term Loans and Advances	11	900,012	571562
TOTAL		21156702	19123963
The accompanying Significant Accounting Policies and notes are an integral part of the financial statements.	1 & 2		
For Nidhi Vijay & Associates			For SAAJHA
Chartered Accountants			
Firm Regn. No. 018913N			
CA Nidhi Aggarwal	Prashast		Saransh
Partner	Srivastava		Vaswani
M. No. 501632	Director		Director
UDIN :			
Place: New Delhi			
Date: 02/09/2022			

Annexure - I

Sneh-Setu : Building bridges with tribal families during Covid-19

- *Akshay Shetty*

Abstract

Saajha was founded in 2014 with a mission to enhance parental and community involvement in education. In Maharashtra, our organization works with the Tribal Development Department (TDD) on strengthening parental participation in the state's tribal residential schools. During the Covid-19 lockdown in 2019, we collaborated with TDD to design and implement 'Sneh Setu' - a program facilitating empathetic telephonic conversations between TDD's teachers and tribal families. We trained and mentored over 250 teachers on making 'reassurance calls' to parents. Teachers spoke to parents and asked how the family was doing, how children were spending their time at home, if they had enough ration, and if there was any immediate crisis in the family. All calls were recorded and documented and in case any parent was in any form of critical distress, a teacher could immediately report it and local officials helped us in addressing it. Through the program, we were able to reach out to over 12,000 tribal households in the state and provide critical relief to more than 130 families within a month. After its successful implementation in TDD, Sneh Setu's design was further replicated in Mumbai's municipal schools and by the Delhi government in its schools.

Prologue

Kailash Ghare lost his job in an automobile company right before the announcement of the nationwide lockdown in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. He was living in a rented accommodation with his wife and son on the Talegaon-Chakan highway, while their younger daughter Poorvi was studying in a residential Ashramshala in Ghodegaon. The previous week, her class teacher called him asking him to take her back home as the school was shutting down indefinitely. On 28th March, Kailash's phone rang again. Aditya, on behalf of an NGO called Saajha, had called to enquire about the family's well-being. After explaining the purpose of the call, he went on to ask how they were coping with the lockdown and whether they have essential amenities at home. Kailash told Aditya how worried he was about the future, since he didn't even have a job anymore. While there was no shortage of foodgrains, he was anxious that ration might run out soon. Due to network issues, he hadn't even been able to contact his village in Malingaon. Furthermore, with both the children at home, he was worried about their studies too. He hadn't received any call from the school since they returned home. Kailash thanked Aditya for calling him. Amidst his growing fear and a sense of isolation he felt reassured that there was someone who cared about what his family was going through. At the end of the call, Aditya shared Saajha's helpline number with Kailash and asked him to reach out if he needed any support.

Introduction

Saajha was founded in 2014 with a mission to enhance parental and community involvement in public education. Over the years, we have worked in collaboration with the Delhi government, in the tribal regions of Jharkhand, in rural Karnataka, and with UNICEF in Mumbai and Palghar in Maharashtra, to enhance parental involvement and strengthen School Management Committees (SMC) to create a thriving ecosystem for children studying in government schools. Since 2019, we have been working extensively in Maharashtra, with a primary focus on enhancing parental participation in Ashramshalas—residential schools catering to children from tribal communities. Over 200,000 students study in 527 Government Ashramshalas scattered across the tribal belts of rural Maharashtra. Over the past few decades, these residential schools have provided basic nutrition and healthcare facilities to lakhs of disadvantaged tribal children. However, they remain under-funded and face severe administrative neglect. In the past few years, the Maharashtra government has started making significant amends in its approach and has embarked on a comprehensive transformation of the state’s Ashramshalas—the collaboration with Saajha was a part of those efforts.

Responding to Covid-19

Saajha formally began its state-wide operations in Maharashtra in November 2019. However, just a few months after our launch, the emergence of Covid-19 put our year-long plan in complete disarray. Pausing our original arrangements, we immediately started creating awareness posters and sending automated calls to parents in order to share information regarding the pandemic with them and how they could take necessary precautions at home. Even as we were engaged with this, we were completely in the dark about the specific challenges that tribal communities in the state were facing. In the last week of March, we decided to initiate telephonic conversations with parents of Ashramshala students. The objective was to check in on them and their children, and to understand if they were facing any problems related to availability of ration, health services and livelihood. After each day of calling, our team would get together on a Zoom meeting and share our observations and reflections from the calls. Two things became clear to us - several tribal families in the state were struggling to make ends meet and most of them had received little or no communication from their schools since their children returned home. A preliminary analysis of our calls revealed that 25 % of the parents didn't have enough ration at home, 73 % were unaware about government relief measures and schemes, 21 % were in severe financial crisis and over 15 % of them reported feeling anxious and unhappy at home. However, as illustrated in the call mentioned in the introduction, most parents felt happy and reassured when we called them. ‘आमची काळजी करणारं कोणीतरी आहे’ was a refrain we heard from many.

The calling process became a rich source of insights for us and we decided to share them with the government. We began sending bi-weekly updates to senior officials from TDD through a WhatsApp group. Manisha Verma, who was then the Principal Secretary, asked us to make a presentation for department officials. In our presentation, we shared the data we had been collecting from our outreach and what we had learnt regarding challenges faced by parents. Impressed with the ground we had covered in such a short time, Manisha Verma remarked that our insights could be helpful in designing policy responses to the pandemic, but also said that we needed to reach out to more parents. With Saajha's team already stretched to its capacity, we suggested the inclusion of Ashramshala teachers for the exercise. The department officials liked the idea and asked us to devise a plan at the earliest. We got down to work.

Preparing for the intervention

The first task we embarked upon was building a database of the students' contact details. TDD had no consolidated information on this; a majority of the contact numbers were either incorrect or outdated. So we reached out to Ashram Shalas across the state and asked them to share whatever phone numbers they had. Most of them shared with us images of school registers, numbers from their DBT database and screenshots of contact numbers from their phones. We raised a team of over 30 volunteers, who immediately started digitizing and classifying these numbers. This remained an ongoing process throughout the intervention and in two months, we were able to build a database of 76,717 students.

While we were collecting students' data, we also began the process of recruiting Ashramshala teachers—who would be involved in calling parents—in collaboration with TDD. For administrative purposes, the department has divided the state's tribal belts into roughly 29 Project Offices (PO), with each PO having anywhere between 5 to 40 schools. Based on their size, we finalized the required number of teachers from each PO and shared it with the respective Project Officers along with a basic list of expectations. These included technical aspects like access to internet connectivity and familiarity with Google Sheets as well as qualitative aspects such as the ability to empathize with parents, knowledge of tribal contexts etc. After constant follow-ups and coordination with POs, we had a list of 241 staff members for the intervention.

After the teachers were finalized, we had to work towards training them for the intervention. While it was easier to monitor Saajha's internal team members when they were calling parents, it was important for us to ensure that the integrity of the exercise was maintained even after expanding its scope. To do that, we prepared a list of broad guidelines to be followed by each teacher during their calls. These included informing the parent that the call was being recorded, tips for connecting better with parents and details of Saajha's helpline in case parents wanted to reach out to us again. We also prepared a document enlisting all central and state government welfare schemes that can be availed by parents, so that teachers could share those details too. For Sneh-Setu, we didn't want to compromise on the quality of calls, no matter how many parents we reached out to. In order to ensure that and to provide necessary feedback to teachers, we decided that all calls would be recorded through a cloud-based calling service.

Calling agent IDs were created for all volunteering teachers and they were required to make calls through an Android application called 'SuperReceptionist'. For call documentation, a Google form was created which included details of how the family was doing, whether they had enough ration, need for NREGA jobs, any immediate crisis in the family etc. This would be helpful in tracking emergency cases as well as in drawing insights from the conversations.

Launching the program

With all backend processes in place, we finally decided to launch the programme on the 1st of May - Maharashtra Day - with an online webinar attended by senior officials from TDD. The programme was called Sneh-Setu - a bridge of empathy and compassion to bring our parents and teachers together amidst the pandemic. In the webinar, Saajha's team oriented over 240 staff volunteers on using the mobile application for calling and the process of documenting the calls. Saajha's senior-most team member, Shakuntala Mankad shared her insights on working with tribal families for over 40 years along with tips on how volunteers could make parents feel comfortable during the conversation. She stressed that the main motive of the call was to have the parent say "I am feeling so much better after this conversation".

Sneh-Setu was formally launched with a phone call made by Manisha Verma to Ratna Pavara's family in Taloda, Nandurbar district.

The Intervention

The outreach calls began on the 2nd of May. We put an elaborate system in place to ensure effective tracking of calls and to provide necessary support to teachers. Each Saajha team member was assigned to support two to three Project Offices and were required to track daily calls made by teachers, allocate schools to them, resolve issues faced by them, listen to call recordings, provide feedback on calls and to communicate regular updates to respective Project Officers. Every Saturday, details about the total calls made by each PO were shared on a WhatsApp group that included all the teachers as well as senior department officials. In case there were less calls reported from any PO, it would be taken up by the respective mentor to take steps to boost calls the next week. Every week, Saajha organized webinars at the Assistant Tribal Commissionerate (ATC)-level—Each ATC heads a cluster of seven to eight POs—in order to motivate volunteers, listen to their experiences and understand various issues parents were facing. These webinars were chaired by the respective Assistant Tribal Commissioners and also served as a platform to recognize the efforts of teachers, acknowledging their noteworthy achievements.

Our outreach to parents couldn't be limited to merely calling parents to check on them; we were aware that many of them might be facing problems that needed immediate attention. We were cognizant of this even when it was just Saajha's team that was calling parents- we couldn't merely tell a parent who had no food left at home to take care of themselves, and move on to the next call. In those cases, we would reach out to friends and NGOs in the vicinity of the parents' village and arrange for help. For Sneh-Setu too, we put a similar system in place with the help of local government officials. A couple of our team members were specifically assigned the responsibility of resolving grievances reported by parents. In the Google form shared with teachers, there was a specific question asking whether parents were facing any emergency related to food availability, safety or health. Our team analysed the form data on a daily basis, filtered parents' responses and prioritized the grievances in terms of severity. Critical cases were immediately brought to the POs' notice and we followed up on them till they were addressed. Other grievances were shared on a weekly basis with the respective POs. Once officials informed us that help had been provided, our team would reach out to the said family, verify the information and then close the case accordingly. A grievance redressal status update was shared on the Sneh-Setu WhatsApp group every week.

The Google form data was also used to obtain insights about the reach of government schemes, challenges faced by parents and the need for NREGA jobs in particular districts. Every fifteen days, we would conduct in-depth analysis of the data recorded through the calls made and shared relevant learnings and recommendations with the government.

Encountering challenges

Sneh-Setu was initiated so swiftly that we were quite sure that we would encounter challenges as we proceeded with the implementation. The key was in quickly identifying them, finding solutions and incorporating them in the program. These fixes only helped in making the program stronger and more meaningful for parents. Some of the challenges were technical—unavailability of correct phone numbers, network issues etc. Even as teachers were engaged in calls, we continued our internal process of procuring and digitizing contact details, and we shared the updated directory with teachers as and when they were ready. Several tribal regions of the state have poor connectivity—on an average, every fourth call made by a volunteer would get connected. Unsuccessfully dialing numbers was quite frustrating for teachers. In Bhamragad, for instance, teachers decided to make village visits in lieu of calling students, as their call success rate was the lowest across all POs.

Sustaining the motivation of teachers throughout the intervention was also challenging. With no additional financial incentive for participation, there was not much that encouraged teachers except a sincere desire to connect with parents. We did work with Project Officers on ensuring that a certain number of calls were made in each PO every week, however that alone was not enough. Regular and constant communication with teachers helped a great deal—on the Sneh-Setu WhatsApp group, we encouraged teachers to share insights from their calls. Every Saturday, we would acknowledge teachers who made the highest number of calls and appreciated their work. However, this snowballed soon as some teachers became overly focused on the number of calls made and not on the quality of conversations. Therefore, we started listening to call recordings and rewarded one teacher every week based on the conversations they had. The teacher of the week was announced with a graphic shared by Manisha Verma, and teachers were thrilled to receive appreciation from the Principal Secretary herself. Additionally, in the fortnightly webinars chaired by Assistant Commissioners, teachers who had done exemplary work would get an opportunity to share their experiences with officials. These gestures helped in giving teachers a sense that their work was important and that it was being acknowledged and appreciated.

A problem we didn't anticipate initially was issues regarding privacy and confidentiality that were raised by teachers. All teachers were required to make their calls through the SuperReceptionist app and these calls were recorded on a server that could be accessed by Saajha's team. Teachers were concerned about all their calls (including calls not made through the app) being recorded and many of them raised this issue in the WhatsApp group repeatedly. On reading these messages, others became apprehensive as well. For us, the recordings were important for three key reasons - tracking call volume, monitoring the quality of calls to give feedback when necessary and ensuring that the safety of students is not compromised. At the same time, we had to allay the fears of teachers so that their trust in the process is maintained. To do this, we shared a video with them explaining why it was important for us to record calls and how the recordings were stored. We provided every Project Office access to SuperReceptionist's dashboard where they could check which of their calls were recorded. We also organized an online open session for teachers with Saajha's tech team to address concerns regarding data privacy and confidentiality. These efforts helped us in creating a culture of open communication and transparency in the intervention.

Baramate Sir was one of our calling volunteers from Rajur PO. When he called Balu Mali's family in Jawale Baleshwar, he found out that Balu had committed suicide ten days ago. His family had also run out of money and there was barely any food left at home. Even though Rajur's PO officials promptly provided help to the family, each such call was a reminder of the unprecedented scale of suffering that we were amidst. While we were grateful about being able to serve tribal families during this period, it was never lost on us that our efforts were merely a drop in an ocean that needed many more rivers of help to flow into it. When we started Sneh-Setu, we had prescribed a minimum target of 10 calls per day for every teacher. But soon enough, teachers reported that some of the calls were so heart-wrenching and overwhelming that they couldn't merely disconnect the call and move on to the next parent. They needed time and space to process the conversation; we eventually asked teachers to call only as many parents as they could. Several parents reported being in severe distress—even though we worked with POs to ensure that some form of relief was made available to them, it wasn't always possible to reach extremely remote villages, which was further worsened due to the lockdown restrictions.

Despite these challenges, we soldiered on and were able to reach out to over 12,000 families in 40 days. The actual call volume was higher than this, but all calls couldn't be documented due to network and technical difficulties. Over 133 families facing critical distress were provided relief in collaboration with Project Offices. The data doesn't accurately capture the dedication and hardwork of TDD's local teams who worked tirelessly to ensure help was provided even in the remotest villages. In Dharni, after our volunteer found out that a parent was stuck in a brick kiln with her three children, the PO officials went to pick them up, took them to a hospital for a medical checkup and dropped them home safely. In Pandharkawada, two children in a family were extremely unwell but were unable to travel due to the lockdown and financial problems. The Project Officer sent an ambulance to the village and the students were examined by a doctor and medicines were provided to them. Amruta Bhale from Mokhada informed us that he was worried for his differently-abled daughter and her child who were stuck in a remote village in Shahpur. PO officials visited the address mentioned by her, but did not find anyone there. Two days later, we found out that his daughter had walked over 80 kms with her baby to her father's place in Mokhada. We then contacted the local ICDS supervisor who visited their village and provided support to the family. Hearing such heartwarming stories from our teachers and officials every day gave us immense hope and relief even amidst the gloom and turbulence that the lockdown was all about.

Learning along the way

The work we did through *Sneh-Setu* also became a source of huge learning for us. Consolidating these lessons were important not just so that we could incorporate them in our future work but also to contribute them to a shared knowledge base of the development sector.

It is important for us to acknowledge and accept that a significant power gap exists between teachers and parents—particularly those hailing from marginalised communities. In many of the call recordings we heard, parents were surprised that their child’s teacher had called to check in on them. *Sneh-Setu* played an important role in bringing teachers closer to their students’ families, helping them in building ties beyond the classroom. Research across the world shows that parents and families play a significant role in education and learning. Building relations with them can help teachers to leverage them for facilitating students’ learning at home. *Sneh-Setu* also gave an opportunity to teachers to enter the worlds and contexts of their students, something which doesn’t happen much when you engage with them in school, divorced from the backgrounds they come from. The next time students are back in school, the teacher will be able to create a space for them to bring a little bit of their homes with them which will ultimately enhance the learning experience of students.

Saajha has been a strong believer in the idea that the state needs to ‘listen’ to the voices of parents. The essence of participative democracy lies in ensuring that voices—including those of parents in government schools—at every level of the state are heard. Perhaps, it might not be possible for the state to respond adequately to everyone, but even listening to them gives parents a sense that their existence matters, that their voice means something. Everytime a teacher called a parent, it was the state taking time out to listen to a citizen. Active listening from the state can help increase parents’ trust in the system, thus enabling their participation in the improvement of schools. Through weekly updates and fortnightly webinars, we managed to ensure that the insights from the conversations happening between parents and teachers reached the highest levels of governance and administration. Going forward, it would be equally important to build sustainable platforms of engagement between parents and teachers, so that the momentum generated by *Sneh-Setu* doesn’t get dissipated.

From the design of the intervention, an important learning we received was that the key to implementing programmes at scale was simplicity, replicability and space for innovation. *Sneh-Setu*’s design was very simple; a teacher could be onboarded to the programme with a simple 15-minute orientation. Few key guidelines were given as conversation points; otherwise it was up to the teacher how they wanted to steer the call. The Google form to be filled after the call too recorded only the essential details. This helped in ensuring that teachers didn’t feel overwhelmed by the exercise and that they could employ their own creativity and ingenuity while engaging with parents. The simplicity of the design also helped us in replicating the program elsewhere, thus expanding the reach and impact of our work.

Beyond Sneh-Setu

As lockdown restrictions started easing in Maharashtra, TDD issued a circular in June instructing teachers to report back to schools. In the circular, teachers were explicitly asked to regularly contact families and to remain in touch with them. Schools were expected to prepare a comprehensive plan on how families would be contacted and how support would be provided to them. Schools were also asked to reach out to Saajha's team if they needed any help in reaching out to families. Thus, Sneh-Setu went from an immediate-response intervention to a defined policy measure. UNICEF also took interest in Sneh-Setu's initial impact, and collaborated with us to take the programme to Mumbai's municipal schools—it was implemented in two wards of the city from June to December 2020. After we shared our learnings from Sneh-Setu with them, the Delhi Directorate of Education issued guidelines instructing all class teachers to call students from their respective sections and to “enquire about their well being, whereabouts and ask for their feedback about the remote classes (sic)”. A format was attached with the circular where teachers were supposed to document the call. The extensive buy-in for the intervention from state governments and institutions like UNICEF was a vindication of our belief that we need to provide a hand of empathy and compassion to our parents in these difficult times. At the same time, it was important that Sneh-Setu doesn't just remain an NGO program—the idea needs to get embedded in the ecosystem of our education system. We are glad that some steps have been taken in that direction.

More than anything else, Sneh-Setu also pushed us to reimagine our approach towards our work. Often, conversations over interventions get limited to quantifiable, tangible outcomes; which can end up reducing the complexities and diversities involved in helping people. Even while we were engaged in the program, a number of questions were raised over the program's outcomes. Do teacher-parent calls increase learning outcomes? Do they contribute towards higher enrolment in schools? While these questions were important, it might also be important to consider that empathy and compassion can also be outcomes by themselves. That treating people with dignity and respect can also be an end that we can aspire for. It is perhaps the best antidote that we have for the fractured and divisive times that we are living in today. So let's keep the conversation going.

Saajha
coordinated with the Tribal Development Department

Ashramshalas
Residential schools catering to children from tribal communities
> 20,000 students in 527 Ashramshalas in rural Maharashtra

Initial research with the parents revealed that

- 73% unaware of government relief schemes
- 25% not enough ration at home
- 21% in severe financial crises
- 15% anxious and unhappy at home

Sneh-setu
Bridge of compassion and empathy between parents from tribal communities and their children's teachers

Outreach phonecalls

- Check in on parents and their children
- Extend support in terms of ration, health services and employment where possible
- Provide compassionate listening and responding through regular phonecalls

Created a digital database of 76,777 students

Trained over 250 teachers

Grievances

- Prioritised in terms of severity
- Brought to notice of Project Offices
- Followed up till resolved

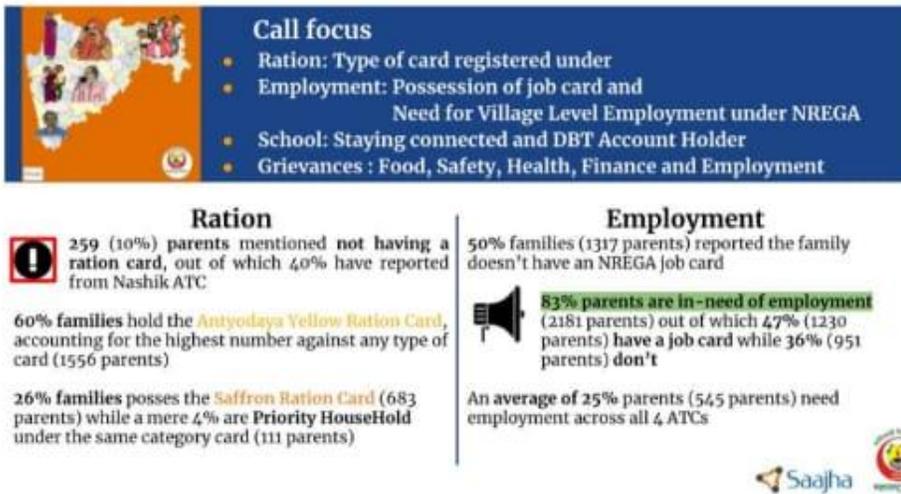
Weekly webinars

- To acknowledge and motivate teachers
- Teachers shared work and experience with officials

Figure 3: Understanding challenges of tribal parents



Figure 4: Call-based support by teachers to parents





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