

## Checking Children's Migration

Varvandi Tanda is a small hamlet of 27 Banjara families with around 180 people, in Paithan block from Aurangabad district in Maharashtra. Interestingly, the student population in the local Zilla Parishad Primary School - 172 in the academic year 2017-18 - almost equals the local population. This is because the school attracts many children from nearby villages. It is seen as a model school, offering good learning environment to its students. In 2014, when Mr. Bharat Kale joined as a school teacher, number of students were 98. It took persistent efforts by him and his colleagues, to transform the school to its present state.

Earlier the main problem of the school was children's absenteeism for prolonged periods, especially post Diwali. This was the time when majority villagers migrated for sugarcane cutting to their worksites in neighbouring districts. Their seasonal migration ranged from four to six months in a year. Most children would accompany their parents and therefore missed their classes. Some children would start working with their parents and never returned to school. This trend continued for years leading to rising number of dropouts and poor learning outcomes of the students.

With hand to mouth existence schooling was hardly a priority for the parents. Their apathy for the school was evident in many ways. There was no connect between the school and the community. Villagers cared the least for the school or anything that was related with the school. Instances like uprooting or breaking the trees and plants in the school campus, misappropriating construction material or any other thing kept in the campus, were but commonplace. Why was this happening?

Bharat Kale tried to get to the root of the problem. He realised that apparently visible issues - children's migration, their absenteeism, poor results or misusing school material - were just the symptoms. "The real problem was lack of trust. People didn't trust the school, because they didn't think teachers would help their children to get a better life. They had no role model before them to prove their belief wrong," he thought.

So the biggest task Bharat Kale took upon himself was to convince the importance of education to the parents. "In my meetings with parents I stressed upon that education is the only way forward for their children. If they don't want to see their children ending up being labourers, just like them, then they should ensure the children attend the school regularly."

Along with reminding parents about their responsibility, the teachers also did their homework to fulfil their duty. "We assured parents that the teachers would get best out of their students. We promised them that here their children will get good education that will prepare them to excel in their lives, and in future they would become well-qualified officers."

In fact, the school rightly roused the hopes and aspirations of parents for their children and promised to fulfil them. And these promises were not hollow. The teachers worked hard to create a conducive learning environment. By using various innovative learning methods inspired by constructivism, they made education much more engaging for the children.

To begin with all the teachers contributed to school development fund from their own savings. Part of this fund was utilised to purchase a solar device, to run the computers and other digital devices existing in the school. Some funds were used to renovate school campus by colouring pictures and educational messages all over the school walls. After doing their own bit, teachers appealed the community to come forward to help. Gradually learning environment got further enhanced through community contribution and other donations. Though majority parents were labourers, total worth

of their contributions in two-year went upto Rs. 3 lakh. Once they got convinced that the school was really helping their children grow, parents helped generously.

To tackle the problem of migration the school started an interim hostel facility, which helped to minimise children's migration to an extent in the first year. Parents felt reassured in the next year, which helped to hold back more students. This time, some children used hostel facility, while some managed on their own with the help of their relatives in the village. In some cases younger children were looked after by their elder siblings. Like a student in Class V took care of herself and her brother in Class II. In a span of 2-3 years the migration issue was completely tackled.

The comprehensive education in the School today facilitates an all-round development of its students. Its daily schedule accommodates all kinds of activities, from classroom learning to outdoor sports, and from reading, English speaking to arts and craft. Children are encouraged to take part in inter-school competitions. Recently a student in Varvandi Tanda School participated in a state level debate competition in English, and won the third prize from among total 400 participants. Majority participants came from private English medium or convent schools. It was a proud moment for the school to see its student standing with confidence in larger student community. The school has many such achievements to its record, which indicate the good quality inputs the student get in the school.

Now the children in Varvandi Tanda School don't like to miss their school even on Sundays!

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