

# Building Community Edu-Leaders to Enrich the Education Experience of Undeserved Rural Children

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When 16-year -old Taniya stepped out of her village, Saradhi(Bihar), she faced considerable skepticism from the conservative community she lived in along with strong opposition from her family. But Taniya was determined to make something of her life and summoning all her courage she enrolled herself in a 3-month community basic tutorship program, outside her village. What followed was a life transformation. From a house-bound village daughter who stared at a future as nothing but a house-bound village wife and mother, Taniya has today altered her path in life altogether. As a teacher in the same institute where she received her training, Taniya looks forward to bringing change to her village and to earning her own income. “This is a dream come true for me,” she says.



One has to hand it to her for perseverance and to i-Saksham, an educational organization, which has penetrated into India's remote rural areas to bring new perspectives to the youth there, by training them to become, what it calls, community edu-leaders. Getting a foothold in such backward regions is

in itself an exercise in guts. To do so in areas where Naxalite presence is active, is nothing short of inspirational. But then the organization is not called i-Saksham without reason. “Saksham means capable in English, and the name i-Saksham defines the guiding philosophy of our organization as we believe everyone is capable of bringing about a change” says Aditya Tyagi, co-founder of the organization and an alumnus of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

i-Saksham was started in 2015 by Aditya Tyagi, Ravi Dhanuka and Shravan Jha, three Prime Minister Rural Development Fellows, while working with the district administration to implement flagship development schemes and to bridge the community administrative divide in Munger and Jamui districts in Bihar. During their time there, the trio interacted extensively with local rural youth whom they were teaching and got an in-depth knowledge of the area, the aspirations of the youth and the enormous limitations they faced.

“Education is an opportunity leveler and its role in creating equity, justice and social awakening is critical,” says Dhanuka, an alumnus of Institute of Rural Management (Anand). However, acute human resource, infrastructural and policy level inequities have created a deepening education crisis, which doesn’t only gets reflected in poor learning levels but also pose huge limitations for youth with regard to any kind of life opportunities. Based on our experience during the course of our fellowship, we conceptualized an innovative model to meet the capacity building needs of youth and learning needs of children. We believed that it would be best to gain the trust of the community, involve its members and involve the youth as key stakeholders in the process. Our research revealed that the best way to do this would be to build a cadre of motivated and empowered rural youth engaged as, what we call, edu-leaders. These young people would deliver quality education to children either through their enterprising community learning centres or be placed to volunteer in local government schools.”



Children Learning Multiplication with Beads

Considering the social fabric of the area that they are working in, progress has been amazingly swift. i-saksham has clearly got deeply into the psyche of the community and understood how to win its trust, as is evident by its track record. The organization today runs two education programmes in the two districts of its operations, viz. the 3-month i-Saksham Basic Tutorship Program affiliated to the National Skill Development Council (NSDC) and a fellowship program, which the organization launched after getting incubated at NSRCEL, IIM (B). The alacrity with which the village youth have got involved has been delightful. The basic tutorship program has reached out to 1000 youth from 50 villages in 3 years and the fellowship program has got enrollments from 50 fellows from 30 villages in the 1.5 years since it has been launched.



Mathematics the fun way

The impact is already beginning to show with 2500 children currently receiving quality education inputs and 60% of them showing improvement in learning outcomes. What is more, community edu-leaders have seen an increase of at least 25% in their incomes and 5 of them are pursuing higher education from good universities. Significantly, new livelihood opportunities have been created with 10 low income private schools having recruited some of the edu-leaders as teachers.



It stands to good reason then that within the short span of its operations i-Saksham has been able to build partnership with prestigious organizations and incubates such as Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Bangalore, IRMA, Wipro Seeding Program, Edumentum, TFlx, Unlimited India and GSE, Santa Clara University.

As for the future....the sky is the limit for this young, energetic organization. “Our focus in the coming years is to invest in building the education ecosystem by bringing all the stakeholders together,” says Dhanuka “We are immediately planning on organizing a Bal Utsav program at the Panchayat level by bringing all the students and edu-leaders of the panchayat together and conducting parent-fellows meetings at the community learning centres as a step into the future. Beyond that the possibilities are endless. Our resolve is to bring the best in the world to these marginalized areas and we hope to get as many people interested in strengthening this movement as we can.”


To know more: <https://www.nsrceel.org/nsrceelsocial/> (<https://www.nsrceel.org/nsrceelsocial/>)

*Gaver Chatterjee*

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