

Information

Educating poor village children during the pandemic

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Kaikala Chetana is a village-based community group which works with around 900 children in rural West Bengal. Our 26 locations are all within a roughly 20km-radius area of Kaikala village in Hooghly district, and 50km from the city of Kolkata. The community educators work with and engage the children of the rural poor in innovative ways, kindling their interest in learning and building their confidence.

Our work started on a positive note in 2020, as Kaikala Chetana celebrated its silver jubilee. However, very soon the COVID-19 pandemic overtook the world, and brought with it fear, uncertainty, and restrictions on our daily lives. Schools were closed indefinitely, but our small learning centers for the poor village children remained open during the lockdown, except for a few months when the infection rate was very high. The centers filled the gap left by closed schools, assuming a vibrant role during the most critical days.

Three factors played to our advantage, allowing us to reopen the centers and start working with the children again from June 2021—taking, of course, the utmost precautions. The centers are spread out in remote working-class rural areas that have been relatively spared by the virus. Children's classes are conducted in open-air community premises that have remained accessible and safer than closed spaces. Moreover, the volunteers who work with the children belong to the communities where the centers are located, meaning their work was not hindered by travel restrictions, nor did they risk transporting the virus from outside. We created an independent resource base in the village and established credibility, which came in handy for working effectively with the children during the critical period when the villages were almost cut off from the outside world.

Flexibility, independence and openness make this educational model different from the conventional patterns in schools, coaching centers or tutorials. The centers can work anytime and anywhere according to needs. Setting up and running the learning centers does not require any official permission. The community, parents and volunteers can decide what to do and how. The model is not burdened with any rigid syllabus and evaluation system. Instead, it follows a curriculum, learning delivery and evaluation system that evolved through working with the children. The young men and women from the community, who are volunteer-educators, do not necessarily need a degree. They need to be interested and motivated. They have the opportunity to consult independent experts to learn different skills, and they learn through experience. Community volunteers cover a wide range of subjects and activities with the children. They tell stories, hold mime and puppet shows, teach dancing and crafts, and organize activities that foster language skills, mathematics and science. They bring with them books and science equipment. They have health and environmental lessons, and put up exhibitions on science topics and children's artwork. In short, they do things that should be done in school, but are usually not. All this happens in open spaces, in front of the community, so that local people get to see what is happening and can themselves decide to participate. It is a privilege and a pleasure for the 'poor' children to learn from the volunteers, who are their own people. They do not suffer from fear of failure and an inferiority complex, and face no discrimination.

Throughout the lockdown, we provided dry food, groceries, clothes, masks and soap to more than 400 needy families at 11 centers, including a large number of the poorest tribal families. We organized picnics, cultural programs and exhibitions at our centers to boost children's morale and sustain their interest in learning. The cooperation of the parents and communities was remarkable. They admitted that the centers were the only hope of education for these children during lockdown;

online education was a distant dream for the rural poor, without computers and internet connections, and family members were unable to compensate for the loss of learning in the absence of schools. We are delighted and inspired that our time-tested ways of working with children proved their worth at this time.

Many among the rural poor fear that life will not return to how it was before, even when the pandemic has ended. They anticipate new challenges and harder struggles for survival. We are therefore preparing to reorient the curriculum to concentrate more intensely on critical thinking and practical, problem-solving skills. Along with academics, children will receive training in how to play an active role in protecting the environment and preventing common diseases. They will also learn about animal rearing and planting to support sustainable, village-based livelihoods in the future. And finally, they will learn IT skills to take on the new age.

The pandemic enriched us with important lessons while also underlining the value of our work. We are grateful to our friends, well-wishers and supporters, who helped us generously and enabled us to support needy children and families in ways that went beyond our expectations.



Somnath Chatterjee
Coordinator and managing director of the non-profit organization Kaikala Chetana



Somntah Chaterjee is the coordinator and managing director of the non-profit organization Kaikala Chetana. This organization focuses on educating children from the poorest rural areas, who for many reasons do not benefit from traditional state-organized education. Its education system is anchored in the community. Coordinators, educators, and volunteers do not just focus on children, but, by working with them, benefit entire communities. This organization has been operating in West Bengal (India) for more than 26 years.