

ALUMNI STORIES

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS

Azim Premji University Publication



Vision

Education for Social change

To contribute to the realization of a just, equitable, humane and sustainable society

Why this book?

Azim Premji University was established as part of a larger goal of the Azim Premji Foundation to contribute to the Education and Development sectors in the country. The University has a clearly stated social purpose. The Social Enterprise Cell of the University reflects that purpose and acts as a support system for students who are trying to come up with innovative solutions to some of the most complex social problems. The cell is a platform to share, debate and discuss their ideas and network with individuals and like-minded groups to take them forward.

From the early years of the University, we have seen that, in every batch there is a small group of students keen to start their own ventures to address social challenges and pursuing social entrepreneurship as a viable career option. Many of them take that plunge immediately after they graduate; others work in social sector organizations for a few years and then quit and begin their journey as an entrepreneur. Over the years, we can see a good number of social enterprises in India, set up by our alumni and running successfully. We felt there is a need to document some of their journeys which can inspire other young people too. This book is a collection of ten such stories.

These stories are an interesting mix of both 'for profit' enterprises such as, *Travelling Tripod Films* started by Goutham, and 'nonprofit' ventures like *Pratigya*, founded by Chandan. The organizations featured in this book are creating impacts in multiple geographies across India – Manipur to Chhattisgarh, Ranchi to Bangalore, Majuli in Assam to Madurai of Tamil Nadu. Truly reflecting one of the foundational values of the Azim Premji University, "education for social change', the changemakers featured in this book are trying to drive educational transformation for marginalized groups in multiple ways, or enabling disabled people access dignified livelihood, empowering tribal women from remote areas or providing more nutritious meals to children from communities. These stories tell us that when we are surrounded by societal challenges or issues, there are individuals who take it upon themselves to find solutions and make a difference. We hope that this publication can inspire young people to join the social sector – either as founders of new ventures or even to work in many such powerful organizations.

The featured alums in this book were interviewed by our postgraduate students of the class 2024. As always, there are multiple people behind the publication of this book. However, one colleague was particularly instrumental in taking this project forward and she is Ridhi Roy (alumni function). We are grateful to all of them.

Happy reading!

Nazrul Haque

Social Enterprise Cell Azim Premji University 14th February 2024

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Empowering differently abled people: The Mitti Café Journey

Social entrepreneurship is an avenue where compassion meets innovation, driving transformative changes in society. **Alina Alam**, the founder of **Mitti Café**, exemplifies this spirit. Azim Premji University alumna and a pioneer in inclusive dining, Alina has built Mitti Café, an initiative that offers an exceptional dining experience and is completely run by a team of specially abled people.

In this interview, Alina takes us on her journey, revealing the motivations, challenges, and triumphs that have shaped Mitti Café into a beacon of inclusivity



Alina Alam MA Development 2015 -17 More@ https://www.mitticafe.org/

What inspired your decision to start Mitti Cafe?

It was during my time at Azim Premji University that I came across numerous concepts that struck a chord with me. The courses I took, particularly sociology, ecology, and sustainability, opened my eyes to viewing the world from different perspectives. These experiences laid the foundation for my determination to create a change, culminating in the establishment of Mitti Café while I was still studying at the University.

My motivation to focus on creating employment opportunities for adults with physical and intellectual disabilities stemmed from personal experiences, particularly the influence of my grandmother, who had a disability, but while growing up, all I saw in her were her abilities. Another significant influence was a documentary I watched about Roman emperor Nero, which made me realise that keeping quiet, looking at the atrocities unfold before you, makes you side with an oppressor.

In my final semester, I chose not to pursue campus placements and began volunteering with organisations in the inclusion space in Bangalore. Through this experience, I recognised the need to shift mind-sets and create awareness about disabilities. Leveraging my belief in the power of food to generate employment and foster inclusion, I conceptualized Mitti Café as 'Mitti' in Hindi means mud, symbolizing our shared origin and destiny despite our diverse backgrounds.

What were the initial challenges you faced and how were they overcome?

The initial stages of setting up Mitti Café were exceptionally challenging. Funding was a significant hurdle due to a lack of start-up capital and my limited knowledge of entrepreneurship. **Rejections from incubation centres** and corporate institutions were disheartening, but the Deshpande Foundation came to our aid, offering the crucial support needed to convert a tin shed into our first cafe in Hubli. The community played a pivotal role, with about 90 percent of our equipment being donated by strangers. We faced similar challenges in securing specially abled individuals to kick-start the cafe, but with perseverance, we overcame these obstacles.

Since our humble beginnings in 2017, Mitti Café has witnessed a transformative journey, growing from a single outlet to over 35 locations across major cities. We now employ over 250 adults with various disabilities and have collectively served over 10 million meals.

How are employees chosen and trained at Mitti Cafe, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds?

At Mitti Café, our employee selection process is multifaceted. We often recruit individuals from underprivileged backgrounds by rehabilitating those found begging or homeless on the streets. Additionally, referrals and collaborations with a network of NGOs and inclusion-focused institutions are essential sources of hiring. Our experiential training program has been pivotal, training over 3,000 individuals with disabilities to date. The training is designed to be comprehensive, emphasizing practical, hands-on experience in a real café environment. This includes training in customer service, inventory management, barista skills, and more. Our trainers, some of whom have disabilities themselves, provide mentorship and guidance, boosting employee confidence and equipping them with crucial job skills.

The programme aims to empower individuals with disabilities, promoting their employability not just within Mitti Café but also within the broader hospitality industry. This fosters independence and self-sufficiency while challenging societal misconceptions about their capabilities. It's not just about serving meals and beverages; it's about making individuals a part of society in all its forms.

What are your upcoming plans for Mitti Cafe?

Our vision for Mitti Café is expansive, aiming to extend our impact across India and beyond by establishing a wide network of inclusive cafes. We plan to open more outlets in different cities, offering meaningful employment to a larger number of adults with disabilities. Collaborations with corporate offices and educational institutions for Mitti Café outlets within their premises are on the horizon, spreading the message of inclusivity and creating diverse employment opportunities. Our new outlet at the Supreme Court of India exemplifies our commitment to inclusivity. Additionally, we are exploring innovative ventures aligned with our mission, potentially creating a product line whose proceeds would support our cause.

Reflections, experiences, and learnings

Being the founder and CEO of Mitti Café has brought me immense personal fulfilment through witnessing the tangible impact our initiative has on individuals with disabilities. Moments where employees gain confidence, improve their quality of life, and contribute to society reaffirm my dedication to this cause. One poignant experience was Kirti's growth from crawling into her interview due to the lack of a wheelchair to managing a café and purchasing her own wheelchair from her salary. Another impactful moment was when our employees initiated serving meals to those in need during the pandemic, embodying Mitti Café's essence of empowering individuals to make a positive difference.

The key lessons learnt are rooted in the power of community and collaboration, resilience, authenticity, and unwavering passion. Starting with a cause that resonates, engaging the community, staying resilient, and embracing challenges are critical elements in the journey of social entrepreneurship, where passion and determination drive lasting impact.









Educating and Socially Empowering Children

Started in 2007 by **Chandan Singh, Pratigya** is a grassroots social enterprise in Jharkhand that works in the field of education, child protection and development. Through its programmes, Pratigya creates a shared community involvement in children's education in three districts – Ranchi, Khunti and Pakud (Pakur).

Committed to tackling rampant child labour and child marriage in the region, Pratigya's Life-Skills Programme aims to provide quality education that enhances personality development and invokes democratic values among the children. In this conversation Chandan talks about how the organisation's initiatives also help create a safe learning ecosystem that prevents children from joining the labour force.



Chandan Singh MA Education 2017-19 More@ https://www.pratigya.in/

What prompted you to start Pratigya?

We started Pratigya as we wanted to create an ecosystem where a child can grow and learn and be safe. We wanted to work with tribal children who are more vulnerable and increase their access to quality education. We also wanted to create a safe environment as Jharkhand is known for child marriage and child labour.

Education is a long-term sustainable solution as it educates a people about ensuring their rights as a citizen and makes them socially empowered.

How is Pratigya's life skills programme different from the conventional education system in India?

The Life Skills programme facilitates the child's critical thinking ability. It allows the children to raise their voices and brings awareness around the concepts of equity and fraternity, which are absent in the current education system. To make children understand these concepts, the programme encourages child leadership, where children elect their own leaders every month. This way the child leaders who act as positions of authority are held accountable. Say, if the school is

supposed to work for 30 days, but it was open only for 28 days, the children would question their leaders to know why the school was not open on all working days.

How does Pratigya cater to children's access to such education?

Education is the fundamental right of every child and is a shared responsibility of the society. In Khunti district, Pratigya works with 10 schools where we try to improve children's foundation in literacy and numeracy. The current quality of education does not address certain learning gaps. We reach out to students of grades 1, 2 and 3 but children from other grades are also free to join. We work with these children with the help of teachers and try to show - how things can be done instead of how it must be done.

Within the district, in every panchayat there are four *mukhiyas* who are trained along with 30 additional representatives. They are responsible for overseeing the education in schools across villages and ensure that every child attends school. However, they are usually more focused on infrastructural issues and not as much on the education within the village.

Monitoring children's attendance is also a way of tracking how many children are being trafficked for work and missing school. The presence of children in the school indicates that they are safe. Remembering Gandhiji's words that local is important, the community should be invested in the education of children.

What are the challenges faced by children in this region?

Child trafficking, child marriage and child mortality is rampant in the region. Many children go to cities like Kolkata and Mumbai to work. We need to create a safe learning environment for them. As many children are first generation school goers, we need to create awareness and a system for parent engagement by involving them in their child's progress to help understand the importance of education for a better future. Otherwise, parents would only send their kids for mid-day meals!

What are your biggest challenges?

Change is a long-term process, and it requires behavioural change within teachers, parents, their belief systems. Everyone wants a quick fix. But it is not something that can happen overnight and does not have any technical solutions.

Secondly, there is a lack of people who want to return to their villages as most development professionals prefer to stay in cities after completing their education. Facing a scarcity of people working at the grassroots level, we try to recruit from the community itself and create local leaders but again it takes time to train them.

How do you see Pratigya contributing to the state level education system and what are your future projects?

Pratigya is looking forward to creating more learning modules with the help of state government and other similar organizations. We have initiated a 'Life Skills with Sports' programme in around 50 government schools in Ranchi. Under this, the students play various sports and taking part in sessions where games are designed on value-based concepts.

We are working with WIPRO Foundation to develop contextual learning

materials for tribal children which will provide holistic learning experience for the kids.

We are going to open six training centres within two communities – the Dalit community and the rag pickers community. We want to connect with children who work as rag pickers and provide them basic education. Generally, all their learnings are through life lessons, which is not counted as education at all. As for the Dalit community, they regularly face severe social discrimination. We want to start our learning and training centres in their communities as well.







Enabling Majuli Island – The Ayang Trust Way

In the scenic expanse of Majuli Island, nestled within the Brahmaputra River in the northeastern state of Assam, **Ayang Trust** runs innovative livelihood and education programmes, collective farming endeavors and flood response initiatives to uplift the lives of its inhabitants. Founded in 2017, Ayang Trust takes its name from the Mising tribal language, where "Ayang" means love. In this conversation, co-founder **Dharamjeet Kumar** maps the journey of the organisation and its works to improve livelihood and build resilience in the region.



Dharamjeet Kumar MA Development 2014-16 More@ https://ayang.org.in/

Was starting a social enterprise always the plan?

To start with, our goal wasn't to start an organisation outright. Our focus was on understanding the core issues faced by the community as we undertook small projects to investigate challenges, such as those faced by the handloom industry and access to markets for their products. We realized that they needed support in accessing resources, both financial and material, which was challenging for them. As we gained a deeper understanding of the community's needs and the need for intervention, we initiated and tailored our programs accordingly. We assisted the community in securing bank linkages for government subsidies on fertilizers and agricultural loans,

enabling them to access finance without interest.

How does Ayang Trust combine profit with social impact?

Ayang Trust is a grants-based organisation with a diverse set of donors. We receive funds through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), foundations and individual donations. Additionally, we've established a women Farmers' Producer Organization (FPO) named 'Lekope' which means 'Coming Together'. Lekope strives to provide a market channel to the women farmers and artisans and enhance their livelihoods. This initiative is an impactbased intervention and is entirely run by women. It ensures that all the associated women are paid a better price, and the profit is kept by them as well as used to expand the production and operation.

We directly work with more than 1,000 farmers in Majuli, and our drive is to ensure that the farmers income should increase by at least 30-40% than the income they earlier received for their produce. We strive to increase the income of any farmer associated with us by 40% and that they get paid in monetary values.

What are Ayang's livelihood building interventions?

At Ayang, under the livelihood intervention, we primarily focus on two categories, off-farm and farm-based intervention. In the off-farm category, we amplify the local traditions in Majuli through training, introduction of latest technologies, and creation of market linkages. We work with handloom weavers, bamboo artisans, and in food processing where we bridge the skill gap, assist in product development, packaging, value addition, and provide training to community members. Additionally, we also do need assessments and introduce training on livelihood interventions that are less prevalent in local markets in Majuli such as bakery training. Following the training, we either provide women with the tools or help women acquire loans from SHGs and government entities through which they can procure the required machinery and tools to start a business.

collaborate with farmers, helping them organize and access better resources which includes providing high-quality seeds, crop production training, and market access. We encourage collective farming to improve their market competitiveness.

What challenges does Lekope aim to address?

Market access was one of the major challenges that we encountered while working with farmers and artisans in Majuli. As a non-profit organisation, we couldn't solely resolve the marketing issue and hence we decided to establish an enterprise – Lekope – to market their products and build a brand. The brand helps us channelize farm produce and assists local producers overcome market barriers.

How do you measure Ayang's impact on the community?

To evaluate the success of our social enterprise initiative, we have impact metrics for community members including women. The metrics evaluates increase in the community members income, improvement in their living standard such as access to toilet, access to better housing, how much social security scheme that they have access to, in terms of land rights, savings or other government schemes. Broadly the metrics are income and monetary focussed but structurally it tracks how many women have been able to come out and access the schemes meant for them and at the

In the farm-based intervention, we

same time what is the improvement in their quality of life at the household level.

How do you ensure that your initiatives respect and integrate the values and traditions of this tribal and culturally diverse community?

As an organisation, Ayang has a strong workforce of 85 people of which more than 70% belongs to the local community. We ensure that all our activities, initiatives and endeavours are hosted and structured around the local communities. This is our participative and respectful approach to the local culture.

Vision for the future

Our vision is to ensure that everyone in the northeast region has access to dignified livelihood and quality education. We are on a mission to form the largest women's collective with 100,000 farmers in the northeast region in the next five years.

Ayang - A world where everyone has a choice to live a life of love, dignity, and purpose irrespective of conditions at birth.



Documenting stories from the Grassroots

Documentary filmmaker and development practitioner, **Goutham G Varrier** is a storyteller with a difference. Founder of **Travelling Tripod Films**, a documentary video and photo production house, he brings to life stories from across the country that capture social interventions and programmes, making a difference to the lives of vulnerable and marginalised communities.

Goutham talks about why it is important to document the work done by organisations in the social development sector.



Goutham G Varrier MA Development 2011 -13 More@ https://www.travellingtripodfilms.com/

Where did the idea to start this organisation come from?

I am a documentary filmmaker, documenting challenges, positive interventions, and scalable solutions across the development sector. When I was doing my masters at Azim Premji University, documentary filmmaking was not very mainstream. During our field work, we realised that audiovisual medium showcasing real stories from the field had a greater impact than reports and presentations. This was the spark.

We started our journey making low budget films. Gradually, as people started noticing and enquiring about the kind of films that we were making, we decided to work on this full-time, and that's how Travelling Tripod Films was born. We are a full-fledged team today with cinematographers, editors, and documentation experts working as full time members.

Did you have a plan B when you first started?

When we started making films, we had no plan of doing this full-time. It was just a part time hobby, not a career. We were simultaneously working on other projects through fellowships and research grants. We were a little sceptical to undertake filmmaking fulltime due to our lack of knowledge on how to start an organization, how to secure funding, and the technicality of film production. All this caused a lot of uncertainty.

What is your role in the organisation?

I work primarily as a director and producer and scout stories that we want to produce. Besides me, there are cinematographers, editors, documentation experts, photographers and other experts both from within the development sector and from mainstream film making space helping us bring the best of both the worlds, the technical expertise of the development sector and the creative aspect of film production in to our work.

What challenges did you face at the beginning of your journey?

I never imagined that I would run my own organisation someday, I never had an entrepreneurial bent. It was a challenge to change this mind-set and start Travelling Tripod Films. A lack of background in filmmaking, the nuances of setting up an organization including registrations, managing financial viability etc. were some of the most prominent challenges in initial years. Further, as funding for documentary filmmaking is limited, the kind of partners we work with and the projects we chose will define how we can sustain it.

Being a documentary filmmaker for over 10 years now, I am still learning from my mistakes, crafting my journey ahead. Documenting stories in the social development sector is still sector is an upcoming concept.

Studying MA Development at the University gave me a sound understanding of the development

sector. Our approach is unique as our team has a good mix of professionals who understands the development sector and knowledge of filmmaking. This approach helps us capture stories in the best possible ways and for specific target audience.

What is your advice to someone who wants to become a documentary filmmaker?

There are two aspects to this. First, there is a lot of work happening at the grassroots level but there is very little data and documentation about it. Most organisations have limited budget or are unable to recruit someone to document their work. Hence, taking such stories to a larger audience has a lot of value.

Secondly, persistence is key. If you are passionate about visual documentation, you will find a way to sustain yourself. It might also be a good idea to first start documenting the work of your current organization before jumping full on in to freelance film production. This way you will be in a better position to understand your area of interest and fine tune your skills.

What is unique about your organisation and work?

What are the projects that you are working on?

Last year we were fortunate to have worked on several projects ranging from livelihoods, renewable energy, local governance, health and so on across Odisha, Bihar, Himachal, Uttar Pradesh, and Kerala.

All these areas and organisations were different from each other and have helped us expand our understanding of the development sector.

What are your plans for Travelling Tripod Films?

Going forward we hope to not restrict

ourselves in to documentary film production in its traditional sense. Telling stories in a way that reaches a more mainstream audience is something we are open to exploring. In the meantime, we will continue to work with likeminded organizations and individuals in bringing to life stories of human interest in the social development sector.

How do you define success as a person?

Success, for me, is being happy in whatever we do. Finding one's purpose in life might be a good starting point to finding happiness!





Fulfilling aspirations for a dignified life: Educating migrant children

In a rapidly urbanizing world, the challenges faced by marginalized communities often go unnoticed. Among these challenges, one critical issue is the access to quality education for the children of migrant workers who relocate in search of livelihood opportunities. **Nomita Sikand**, the co- founder of **Gubbachi Learning Community**, a social enterprise dedicated to ensuring education and empowerment of migrant children in Bangalore discusses the challenges these children, face and the inspiring work being done to address it.



Nomita Sikand MA Education 2011-13 More@ https://www.gubbachi.org.in/

What inspired you to embark on this journey?

I am an alumna of Azim Premji University Bangalore, having graduated with an MA in Education in 2011. Prior to joining the University, I worked as a teacher in prominent schools in Bangalore. However, my time at the University transformed my perspective on education. The program exposed me to the interconnected aspects of education through various educational philosophies. One significant realization occurred during our fieldwork in Sarjapur, where I observed the lives of migrant workers from West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, and parts of Bihar. These families worked tirelessly on construction sites, with both parents

contributing to the labor. Their children either played around these areas or, if older, joined in some work. It became evident that while children from more privileged backgrounds had access to education and its benefits, those on the other side of the school gate were missing out on the opportunity to learn and grow.

What does Gubbachi Learning Community aim to address?

Gubbachi Learning Community addresses the critical issue of out-ofschool children through community engagement and empowerment. By listening to the community's needs, aligning efforts with existing policies, and respecting their unique perspectives, the organization effectively reaches and supports these children.

Gubbachi serves as a bridge between migrant workers' families and mainstream schools, primarily focusing on linguistic challenges. We teach English and Kannada to enable children's access to education. Our programs include the Bridge Learning Program for ages 6 to 9, the Proactive Program for ages 10 to 16, School Adoption Program to partner with schools, and Gubbachi Enable Program for community welfare.

What were the challenges faced by Gubbachi in its early stages?

Starting a social enterprise is never without its challenges, and Gubbachi Learning faced several hurdles during its early stages. Funding was a significant obstacle, as donors often wanted to see results before committing to the cause. Additionally, building a dedicated workforce without immediate financial incentives posed difficulties. However, we overcame these obstacles through determination, community engagement, and collaboration with stakeholders.

What impact has Gubbachi made in the community that you work with?

One significant milestone is the success story of a young boy who transitioned from underage domestic work to pursuing education. They community needed a model which they found in this boy. The impact goes beyond individual success - it has transformed the community's perception of education, leading to increased enthusiasm among children for learning. In the Sarjapur area where we work, people now believe that they are also part of this society, and education is essential for children as it can change their lives.

Now, children come to us and are enthusiastic about learning new things in the curriculum. This highlights the transformative power of education, "Our focus is on quality over quantity. We want these children to realize their potential, to feel free, and to have the power to achieve their dreams." We also provide training to teachers through the "**Nali kali program**," which is in collaboration with the state government. They learn about program planning for different levels, and various schools collaborate with us.

How does Gubbachi support in empowering underserved families?

Beyond education, Gubbachi Learning empowers families with knowledge and resources by facilitating healthcare access and documentation. The organization believes that improving all aspects of their lives is essential for unwavering empowerment. To address this challenge, we organise health camps, provide medical care and medicines, maintain records and help people obtain necessary documentation. We assist them in opening bank accounts and creating awareness about rules, wages, and labor-related policies.

How do you communicate the significance of your mission to potential donors and supporters for your role in resource mobilization?

The commitment to quality learning is at the core of Gubbachi Learning's mission, and it aligns with the resource mobilization efforts. We prioritize accepting funds only when they align with our organization's mission and values. Building genuine, ongoing relationships with donors is essential, whether they are from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds or individual contributions. We carefully select funders who are willing to provide sustained support for our long-term initiatives. Ultimately, all funders seek results and outcomes, so we diligently track and demonstrate the impact of our programs to maintain their trust and support.

Advice to aspiring social entrepreneurs.

Building and running a social enterprise is a unique journey of continuous learning. Every day brings new experiences, and through these experiences, you gain valuable insights. I've faced challenges along the way, but I've also found solutions based on what I've learned previously. For an aspiring social entrepreneur, I would emphasize the following:

• Clarity of Vision: Define your

mission and vision clearly. Focus on addressing existing issues rather than creating new ones to stay on the right track. Start from the grassroots for ground-level understanding of problems and effective solutions must be relevant and practical.

- **Collaboration:** Don't work in isolation. Partner with individuals and organizations who share your vision and can contribute through their expertise and resources.
- Holistic Solutions: Address problems comprehensively, considering their broader implications. Aim for sustainable solutions that have a lasting impact.
- Remember that building a social enterprise is dynamic, and success requires adaptability, resilience, and a genuine commitment to positive change.

The future path

In the future, I aspire that all children have access to quality education, particularly migrant children. Additionally, I aim to facilitate access to essential government schemes and benefits through documentation and improved living conditions for them and their family members. As an organization, our vision includes expanding our reach and building connections with individuals who prioritize quality. We firmly believe in the transformative power of quality over quantity, distinguishing us from those who solely focus on numbers.









Schools of the future – 'Education leaders impact a school's success.'

A little less than a decade ago, **Ram Prakash Krishnan** found himself on a quest to challenge India's rote-learning inclined education system. He started a small venture, faced some common startup problems, and gave up. A few years later, a serendipitous encounter and an M.A. Education course at Azim Premji University led to a profound romantic and professional partnership between him and his partner, **Regila Marinus**. Together, they started **Vidhya Vidhai Foundation** (VVF), a social enterprise committed to sowing the seeds of education in Tamilnadu, Puducherry, and Hyderabad.

Starting with two schools in 2017, they are today impacting 2 million students through 30000 educational leaders. In this interview, Ram Prakash talks about his unique and conscientious approach to leadership-focused education, what is the role of school leaders and what the future of education truly holds.



Ram Prakash Krishnan MA Education 2015 -17 More@ https://vidhyavidhai.org/

Why does VVF focus its efforts on school leadership?

Given the impracticality of completely revamping India's existing education system, the need for a substantial number of school leaders becomes evident. VVF focuses on school leadership to develop education leaders, such as principals, head teachers and other educators, and empower them to lead effectively. These leaders significantly impact a school's success and the quality of education provided. India boasts around one million public schools, and in the coming 30 to 40 years, it is imperative to develop approximately three million education leaders to oversee and drive these institutions effectively.

This emphasis is crucial when we consider the historical context of education in India, spanning nearly 180 years. Progressive nations prioritize strong school leadership in their education systems, resulting in efficient

and effective operations.

How does VVF empower and support school leaders, providing them with the tools and knowledge needed to drive improvements in their schools?

While we embrace the growing digital needs within the education space, we firmly believe in using technology as a complementary tool, not a replacement for effective teaching and leadership. We guide our school leaders through a process of problem identification and solution development. We introduce them to various frameworks for comprehensive school assessment to evaluate different aspects of improvement.

Frameworks such as Shaala Sidhi or the current one, School Quality Assessment and Assurance framework, that consists of domains, including infrastructure, community, and teacher participation. Within the framework, we use rubrics to assess different aspects of the school and categorize them based on their performance. By examining schools through these frameworks, school leaders can pinpoint areas in need of improvement. We support the leaders in devising their solutions through formulas and strategies such as proven intervention concepts, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. We encourage them to collaborate with various stakeholders and implement a project-based approach within their schools, tailored to their unique circumstances. This collaborative approach ensures that solutions are

comprehensive and sustainable.

Why is there a need for a systemic approach to education, and how does VVF address this need?

At Vidhya Vidhai Foundation, we understand that education is not just about students and teachers it's a complex ecosystem involving various stakeholders at different levels. That's why we take a systemic approach to our work, recognizing the interconnectedness of all elements within the educational landscape. Vidhya Vidhai works at three levels

State : A sustainable capacity building model for HM's in the state

District: School Excellence in every District

School: Innovations and Solutions for Child-centered education

While we believe in the power of systemic change to drive sustainable impact, we also understand the importance of grassroots efforts and single-school improvement initiatives. By piloting solutions, prototyping innovations, and refining models at the ground level, we gain valuable insights that inform our broader systemic interventions.

Our commitment to systemic change is grounded in our belief that sustainable impact requires an innovative approach—one that considers the context and engages stakeholders at every level of the educational ecosystem. By working collaboratively and strategically, we aim to ensure child-centered education for every child in India.

What are the main challenges when working with state-run government schools and affordable private schools?

In both types of schools, a key challenge is helping school leaders recognize their roles as leaders rather than just administrators. In government schools, the primary challenge lies in convincing stakeholders of the importance of leadership development programmes despite having qualified teachers. The National Education Policy 2020 includes a chapter on the importance of school leaders, but more support is needed to emphasize leadership development.

In contrast, convincing affordable private schools to prioritize quality education can be challenging. They are focussed on admission and enrolment rates as it directly translates to increased income. This perspective can hinder efforts to bring about changes in teaching staff, school leadership, and other aspects. Additionally, the effects of such changes on student enrolment may not be immediate, taking 2 to 3 years to show significant results. Most schools pay low salaries to their teachers, making it difficult to hire and retain qualified educators. It's the government's responsibility to ensure quality education in all schools by regulating and monitoring such institutions.

How does VVF engage with local communities and parents to ensure a collaborative approach to education improvement?

Achieving our ambitious vision to equip three million school leaders by 2030 demands collaboration on multiple fronts. We believe that transforming education is a shared responsibility. We need to work together to address the challenges in education, be that of learner disengagement, teacher effectiveness, or the lack of school leadership. We also believe that community participation is crucial for strengthening schools and addressing such challenges. While school leaders may change, the communities remain a constant presence. In the regions that we work in, we primarily engage with local communities and parents through our school management committees (SMC). We also work to educate parents and committee members so they can guestion and interact with the educational system effectively, thereby aligning it with the demands and needs of the local community.

How do you measure and track the impact of your initiatives?

While our direct beneficiaries are school leaders, the end beneficiaries are the school children. We believe that the impact trickles down to the students, but we measure and track the impact of our initiatives primarily through school leaders, as they are our direct beneficiaries. We assess their leadership by monitoring the initiatives

they undertake, the changes in their approach, and their involvement in activities such as conducting SMC meetings. We also track the level of parent participation in these meetings and the types of initiatives being implemented. These measurements help us gauge the effectiveness of our programs in schools. We envision ourselves as catalysts for this transformation, ensuring sustainability.







Driving Educational Transformation: An impactful journey of North East Educational Trust

As a child, **Risha Barooah** unhappy with the formal schooling set-up that she attended. As an adult, she realised the importance of enhancing a child's capacity for critical thinking and creative expression using innovative learning and teaching methods. A strong desire to bring a positive change in the field of education led to the setting up of **North East Educational Trust (NEET)**. A social entrepreneur with great passion and energy, Risha talks about her vision, and unwavering commitment to offer children a unique learning experience.



Risha Barooah MA Development 2011 -13 More@ https://www.northeasteducationaltrust.com

When and how did you start looking at the education system?

In 2011, I joined Azim Premji University to pursue a master's in development, though my true passion was in the field of education. At the University, I actively engaged in fieldwork, visiting various organisations that employed alternative education methods. The program gave an opportunity to explore organisations like Digantar in Rajasthan, Centre for Learning, and other schools in Bangalore to observe their pedagogical approaches. I took a two-month internship at Digantar where I closely observed their teaching practices and curriculum development. I intended to adapt their successful curriculum for teaching languages in Assam, specifically Assamese, in Torajan village in Sonitpur district. After completing my master's, I also embarked on independent research endeavours.

How did the organisation take shape in the initial years?

In 2015, after spending over two years working in Uttarkashi, I returned to my home in Assam with the idea of initiating something meaningful in the region. We started reconsidering our trust's potential and explored various schools and organisations involved in alternative education. We were awarded a minor Research Project by Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University to evaluate the Diploma in Elementary Education program for inservice teacher trainers and teachers, to examine its implementation and identify its shortcomings in Assam. Additionally, we conducted research on the pedagogical practices of Digantar. Additionally, we conducted research on the pedagogical practices of Digantar and a school in Tawang.

Based on the insights gained from these research studies, we decided to establish a community library in 2017. My learnings from Bookworm's library educators' course and Digantar's Foundation of Education course greatly aided in setting this up and marked the beginning of our journey.

What are the initiatives and programmes run by NEET?

We are actively involved in three main programs: the Teacher Education Program, the Language Learning Program, and our Community Library initiative.

In our Teacher Education Program, we offer workshops, mentorship support, and exposure visits to teachers from both private and government schools, as well as educators from grassroots organisations that collaborate with the government school system. We collaborate with more than 18 organisations and have trained over 550 teachers across sixteen districts in four states. The Language Learning Program serves as a valuable support initiative, currently operating in 17 schools in Kamrup district. We conduct on-site demonstration classes, teaching children in English and Assamese. We also offer bridge courses for children whose learning levels are not yet aligned with their age to help them acquire fundamental reading, writing, and speaking skills in either Assamese or English, facilitating effective learning. Under this, we work with 17 schools and reach more than 6.000 children.

Our third program, the Community Library, offers free academic and extracurricular learning through a structured library program to children from marginalised backgrounds. We organise book talks, read aloud sessions, and creative expressions activities like dancing, singing, and drama. These activities empower the children to think critically and express themselves creatively.

What were some of the initial challenges that you faced?

Conveying the concept of our library to the different stake holders, as a free and open space where silence isn't the norm, building and grooming a team, and fundraising were some major challenges.

Additionally, the scarcity of highquality Assamese books was a major roadblock. To address this, we translated and printed many books from the Story Weaver platform. In 2018, alongside the community library, we initiated a library program in

schools wherein we worked on curating an extensive assortment of Assamese books and got involved in translating and printing books to meet our specific needs.

Are there any unique strategies you've employed to build trust and collaboration with the local community?

We regularly conduct community visits and organise events for children, which are well-attended by community members. We host events such as summer and winter workshops, annual sports weeks, and medical camps. These activities help ensure that our community members are actively engaged and regularly participate in our programs. Our regular community visits help maintain a strong presence particularly at our Guwahati Centre.

Can you highlight a significant milestone that stands out in this journey?

I believe that launching the language learning program in government schools represents a noteworthy milestone in the development of the NEET. This initiative has played a pivotal role in the organisation's growth and the materials developed through these programs have been instrumental in the creation of teacher training manuals. These manuals essentially serve as the cornerstone for the courses we have developed.

The support from WIPRO and Wipro Applying Thoughts in Schools (WATIS) fellowship that we were awarded, along with a grant from Wipro Foundation played a pivotal role in our growth. We also received an incubation grant from Idea, which aided us in becoming a valuable resource organisation.

Do you have any new projects on the horizon?

Our goal is to become a resource organisation and broaden the reach of our Teacher Engagement Program. We plan to achieve this by expanding the program with teachers of 20 schools across three clusters in Balipara Block of Sonitpur District.

Has this journey of establishing a social enterprise personally fulfilled you?

This journey has been a profound learning opportunity. Despite my previous roles as a teacher, trainer, and coordinator, the knowledge, and insights I've gained here are truly exceptional and distinct from my prior experiences. Currently, my role has evolved into more of an administrative one, wherein I provide support to my team in program implementation, design programs, and facilitate their execution.

My advice to those who aspire to embark on a social entrepreneurship journey would be to remain consistent and be persistent. In this line of work, a lot of times, we won't get immediate results but it's important to keep the objectives in mind as we work towards them.









Forest to Fortune: Empowering tribal women farmers

Satendra Singh Lilhare is the founder of 'Bastar Se Bazar Tak,' a social development enterprise located in Uttar Bastar, Chhattisgarh. It primarily works with smallholder farmers and tribal women forest dweller farmers on post-harvest management of non-timber forest produce like tamarind, mango, custard apple, palash flower, and black plum (jamun). It converts the forest produce into pulp, paste, and powder, supplying them to institutional buyers, caterers, dealers, and distributors.

Satendra talks about how his organisation is empowering smallholders and tribal women farmers in the aspirational Uttar Bastar district.



Satendra Singh Lilhare MA Development 2014 -16 More@ https://forestnaturals.social/

What is the vision and mission of Bastar Se Bazar Tak?

The vision of 'Bastar Se Bazar Tak is to enhance the contribution of the forests to the national economy and welfare of the present and future generations, considering the preservation of biodiversity and climate change. To achieve this, we need to reduce minor forest produce losses, build the natural forest produce losses, build the natural forest products, and create flexible & supportive local employment through collective action. Our mission is to help end extreme poverty and improve livelihoods of tribal farmers by creating pure and natural forest products.

What inspired and motivated you to embark on this journey?

I am from Gondia - Gadchiroli district of Vidarbha region in Maharashtra, which is mostly a forest area. Since childhood, I have been familiar with forest products and come from a smallholder family background.

During my M.A in Development at Azim Premji University, I did my specialisation in livelihoods as it was very close to my heart and helped me gain a better understanding of the sector. It helped me gain knowledge about various form of social enterprise in agriculture and the current state of India as an agrarian country.

After University, I joined Catalyst Group, a Bangalore-based Non-Governmental Organisation with a farmer collective project in Chhattisgarh. Working on this project helped me learn how to build a rapport and engage with communities. During this time, a chance reading of a NITI Aayog report about Chhattisgarh's aspirational districts and their poor condition nudged me to think, 'hame rajya ke vikas ki bhagidari me, gaon ke jungle se kuchh karna chahiye.' (I should contribute towards the development of my state from the forests in the villages). This thought inspired me and during the same time I met a fascinating farmer Haresh ji to imagine how we could contribute and strengthen the rural Bastar economy. This is how I started to develop the idea for my social enterprise.

The foundation and evolution

Bastar is an aspirational district of Chhattisgarh, and I had some experience working in this forest area and with forest products. I chose and decided to start in Bastar as it looked ideal for my social enterprise. I believe that both Bastar's soil and I are one and the same.

The journey of Bastar Se Bazar Tak started on September 28, 2020 with just one product. Currently, we offer nine products and work with 1,100 smallholder farmers. We also have a procurement program that provides 84 days of employment to 167 farmers. We have created four full-time jobs and 64 part-time jobs, and we have three volunteers. This is the impact of our social enterprise in Bastar within a span of 3 years.

The story of Ambika, a community member, is one of the success stories

amongst many. She owned only three acres of land and used to work under the MGNREGA program. But now she has overcome the many challenges in her life and feels empowered as she leads the operations at our social enterprise. She currently manages more than 100 teams of women and is an inspiration to other community members.

Community support is crucial to our success and trust has been built over time. The community members actively participate in our initiatives, making our collaboration stronger. I live among the local community to give them the sense that I am one of them. Involving the community in every step to maintain transparency and accountability in our operations and financial management is inherent in our processes. We discuss our investments and profits with them openly and honestly and are always accountable to them for our decisions.

What are some of the challenges your organization has faced?

Every day is a new day and comes with new challenges. Bastar being an underdeveloped area, there is a lack of infrastructure and persistent power issues. Initially, finance was a major hurdle and so was cold storage, given the perishable nature of our products.

Additionally, traveling in this remote district is quite challenging as there is poor bus connectivity and relying on local buses or auto rickshaw leads to wastage of time. I don't own a jeep, and do not know how to ride a bike which presents another layer of challenge

for me. So every time I need to travel, I have to find and request someone who can ride the bike. This presents an endless challenge.

Recognition and Awards for Bastar se Bazar Tak

Our model of a social development enterprise has been accepted by global companies and won many national and international awards for its innovative approach and significant social impact. The World Economic Forum has selected us as one of 15 global companies in Southeast Asia. The company's achievements have been recognized by prestigious awards such as the 'TATA Social Enterprise Challenge 2021' and the 'Young India Challenge Award 2020'. We have also been awarded by the Government of India and have collaborations with the state and central governments. In addition, we have raised investment and collaborated with five other organizations for research and development.

Personally, I have been awarded the Buddha Fellowship, a program which helps build capacity by linking the fellows with rural community, unlocking grants and private capital, providing grassroots mentoring by leading development experts with clear business and social goal These accolades reflect the company's commitment to creating long-lived environmental and social outcomes that benefit both the tribal farmers and the consumers.









Health and Education Revolves around the Axis of Nutrition

Uma Maheshwari, founder of **We Mana Nutrition**, worked with children from marginalized communities, did her postgraduation in development to have a 360-degree perspective to work in the social sector. Immediately after the University, she worked in a child centric NGO that worked with children from anganwadis, and then in a nutrition-based company before becoming a social entrepreneur.

The ever-growing numbers related to malnutrition, stunting, and wasting among children in India is quite disturbing. Malnutrition impedes the physical and mental development of children and causes various health issues. Uma's organisation We-Mana Nutrition is trying to combat this exact issue. She talks about the importance of making people aware about this interplay between nutrition, health, and education.



Uma Maheshwari MA Development 2012 -14 More@ https://wemana.in/

Can you share the story and motivation behind establishing We Mana Nutrition?

I had 12 years of experience of working with students from economically marginalized communities and malnutrition was very high among them. I observed that they were lagging in their ability to comprehend as compared to students coming from affluent backgrounds. My learnings at Azim Premji University gave a direction to my goal. One of my electives at the university, health, and nutrition, laid the foundation stone for We-Mana's existence.

What was your intention behind setting up a Social Enterprise over an NGO?

I decided to start a social enterprise as I believed that creating jobs and contributing to the economy alongside creating a social impact made more sense. I believe strongly in the dignity of labour, and I wanted people to have a way to earn their living while also making an impact in the community.

How did you embark on this journey?

In 2018 I felt the need to start my own venture that focused on nutrition, to fill the gap I saw. My vision was to come up with an interesting yet nutritious product, at a reasonable price for kids and adults alike, a product that they would enjoy eating and one that would help fill the nutrition gap in their diet.

Prototyping to proof of concept of the product happened in my kitchen. My children supported me by contributing to the design and production and were the guinea pigs at tasting/ testing the bars. Apart from my family, I also had some friends and well-wishers without whom I would never have had the courage to start my own venture.

My focus was clear from the get-go, to make a nutritious yet tasty product that is affordable. Over the past 5 years we have been partnering with various NGOs. We have grown to a staff size of 7 members and are still growing year on year.

What kind of organizations do you partner with?

We-Mana believes in growing together. We partner with NGOs that focus on helping children and women from underprivileged backgrounds and we periodically distribute our products amongst them. Some of the NGO's that we partner with are ACTS Trust, Diya Ghar, Gubbachi Learning Community, Magic Potion, Vonisha Service Foundation, and Rotary. We Mana also collaborates in government-initiated projects.

Through the pandemic, we worked in collaboration with UNICEF and the Government of Karnataka to provide nutrition bars to the frontline workers and to all the migrant workers who were returning home.

What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?

When I began to explore the social enterprise space in 2015, one of the initial challenges I faced was that social entrepreneurship was relatively new and people did not understand the concept of a social enterprise, but we have come a long way since then.

We-Mana has faced challenges at multiple levels ranging from scale of operation, marketing, finance, scaling up and lack of awareness regarding nutrition and its impact on the mental and physical development of a child. We have been able to cross and are still crossing bridges as we come to them.

Our biggest challenge was the need for a mentor to guide a business with a vision to impact society and yet make profit and grow. We have been able to find this through Bridge Foundation, an accelerator program meant exclusively for social enterprises.

Why is your organization focusing on millets instead of other food?

Millets are high in fibre and are more nutritious than other grains as it contains more micronutrients. As millets have been a part of our diet over the centuries, they are easily acceptable to the Indian eating habit. Our nutrition bars contain fibre, calcium, protein, iron and other essential micro and macronutrients from natural sources that are important to being well nourished.

What kind of impacts did you see among children and women after you started working on nutrition?

We constantly hear from teachers and caregivers of how the children can focus better, reduce incidences of cold and other ailments, and have higher energy levels. We even have a testimony from a parent whose child was anemic and showed improvement in her hemoglobin levels. We hope to quantify the impact of our bars very soon.

What is your advice to someone who wants to set up a social enterprise?

Entrepreneurship is a journey, be persistent, be patient and never give up. Be clear of your end goal and be flexible along your path.

Where do you see We Mana in future?

We are currently in the process of growing the company and our eventual goal is to be able to make nutrition a priority in every Indian's diet. We hope to be the catalyst of change in a nationwide effort to eradicate malnutrition and hunger.









Library for All: Building foundational skills

Education is the base and the driver for most social movements and changes. It is also the source of dignity and a way of including yourself in the nation building narrative. This idea encapsulates the mission and vision of **Korou Education Foundation**. **Yasin Khan**, an alumnus of Azim Premji University, started Korou with the aim of filling the gap in education in his home state of Manipur by teaching children quality English language, especially those belonging to lowincome tribal families.

In this interview, Yasin does a deep dive into his journey and reveals the challenges and victories that have helped shape Korou into what it is today.



Yasin Khan MA Development 2011 -13 More@ https://www.korou.org/

What inspired you to start Korou Education Foundation?

The inspiration to start Korou was a gradual one. I had various opportunities before Korou where I was involved in the education sector. Even though I am from the development sector, my first experience in the field of education was my research internship at UNICEF where I was evaluating the work done in the school safety programs in Bihar. After this, I went on to work exclusively in the education sector in various roles.

During my time at Azim Premji University, I focused my study on livelihoods and realized that if a family doesn't have basic income to support themselves, then they would not be able to afford necessities like health and education. This realisation inspired me to play a positive role by bridging the gap in education and help bring it to more children in my district. This, in addition to my years of experience in the field of education made me bring to life Korou, in the form of Library for All, where tribal children going to government schools were introduced to good quality English language books by training the teachers.

Was setting up an enterprise in a place like Ukhrul, a challenge?

At the outset, my colleague and I set up of our office in Ukhrul with the help of people familiar with the local language. We built-up connections with the local government officials, government school authorities and teachers. Gaining the trust of these people in power was not challenging, except for the language barrier. We did face several hurdles when we tried to implement our idea of a "Library for All" children. This was difficult because children would not make use of the library resources by themselves, and we had to think of various ways to make the available materials more interesting and interactive for the children.

What made you focus on teaching English language to children?

As English is the only language that we teach children, we were asked as to why we promoted English and not the state language. Our decision to focus on English came from the realisation that English is important for better career prospects and can act as a skill for underprivileged children to better their lives. In Manipur, you would find a different language every time you move away from a district. Given this background, not teaching English would hamper their growth and development.

Along with Library for All, what are the initiatives undertaken for children?

Library for All was the name of our pilot project, which was later renamed Korou Education Foundation when we registered it officially. Through Library for All, we hoped to make educational

resources more easily available and accessible to students all over the district, especially in government school. But we found that this was inadequate in helping us move towards our vision. This was primarily because not every child was making use of the library resources as well as we expected them to. So, we work with school teachers to incorporate the library resources into the curriculum and create content that would engage the students as well as comprehensive worksheets that would serve as a tool for gauging how much the student has learnt or made use of the library resources. This aids our main program of enabling better quality education for children of Manipur.

Education was deeply affected during the COVID years; How did Korou work around it?

Ever since its inception in 2017, Korou had been working in Ukhrul for around 1-2 years Later, we shifted our headoffice to Imphal and continuous negotiations with the state government, we were able to spread our support and our projects throughout the state of Manipur just before the COVID-19 lockdown. As the world came to a standstill. We had to adapt our approach to continue reaching out to our students. We delivered reading materials at the doorsteps of our most underprivileged students in some of the most deprived districts around Imphal. But, unfortunately we were unable to reach out to all students throughout the state.

Finally, how do you see Korou growing?

Originally, we envisioned Korou to be working only in the state of Manipur. However, now we see it expanding to other states in the country. To begin with, we are slowly expanding in Nagaland and hope to make meaningful strides in the field of education there as well.









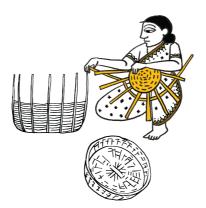
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