

Unnati's participation in the Education Department's Teachers' Conference

The education department conducts a Teachers' Conference once a quarter in which teachers from the approx. 10 schools Unnati works with. Unnati office bearers participated in two such conferences. As the larger goal is to communicate about Unnati's work in this forum, our team understood the conference schedule, discussion trends, tasks, and operational nuances. The learning comprised Performance Grade Index, fundamental testing, new literacy programme, conducting tests to assess teaching efficacy, grading children's learning levels, overall school programme structure, etc.

Classes start in Ashram Schools

After receiving necessary approvals from the Department for Adivasi Development, Unnati ISEC commenced work with middle school (i.e., grade V to VIII) students. Interventions like literacy classes, reading room projects and youth group development followed with students at multiple levels. Unnati ISEC is the first institution to commission reading rooms in the Thane district's ashram schools.



Loudspeaker (Bhonga) reading rooms

As a part of the village reading room project, Unnati undertook in two hamlets viz. Koha and Khirkund the maiden initiative of 'Loudspeaker (Bhonga) reading rooms' in August 2023. Stories in Marathi and Korku are broadcast in the village chowk over loudspeakers. Villagers listen in whilst carrying on with the daily chores. The illiterate, visually challenged, home-maker women, and men and children alike get an opportunity to tune in to these stories.



As this novel initiative was interesting, residents were keen to listen to the stories whilst at their doorstep. Bhajilal Kasdekar – a resident of Koha, who hitherto did not participate in the book exchange programme is now – in the wake of the 'Loudspeaker reading room' initiative - actively involved with the book exchange programme.

Children carry out a family survey in own village



During the current year, Unnati ISEC has been engaged with select teenagers on developing their leadership skills. Whilst providing work opportunities to this Youth Group, emphasis has been placed on developing overall skills. These teenagers would be tasked at the Diwali festival to implement the Village Reading Room project in their respective villages. To prepare for this initiative, Unnati ISEC delivered sessions to develop the teenagers' skills and impart knowledge. When the teenagers visited their villages for the Ganpati festival, they were trained to carry out a survey among select families that would further the cause of the 'Village Reading Room.' Focused instructions were provided on developing a question paper where the children themselves drafted the questions. Select members of this young group filled survey questionnaires during the Ganpati festival from 10 to 15 families. Unnati workers met with the teenagers and troubleshooted issues as they arose. The teenagers later admitted at focused group discussions that this exercise improved their communication skills, raised their level of confidence, and lent a sense of purpose to their delivery. This work is now being extended to the ashram schools in Shenvé and Babré.

Initial capacity test for literacy, Akot

Planning for teaching and learning is imperative at the start of an academic year. Unnati ISEC administered an 'Initial Capacity Test' in five villages for second- and third-standard, returning-after-summer-break students. Based on the test outcomes, students were categorized based on the prevailing learning levels. The categories (viz. alphabets, vowels, syllables and reading) aimed at focused improvement in the areas where a learning shortfall was evident.

Initial capacity test for literacy, Shahapur

It was decided to implement reading classes among 5th and 6th standard students within Unnati ISEC's sphere of work. To assess the students' reading capacity, a baseline test was conducted in July 2023 in the Shenve, Babre, Taki Plateau and Kothare hamlets. Using the test results, students were categorized in four groups based on the observed deficiency viz. alphabets, vowels, syllables and reading. A separate group for weaker students was merged with the 30-odd school children to address literacy. Overall, the objective of inculcating 'Meaningful and deep reading' amongst readers was prioritized.

A special programme with women and girls..



The Korku society is dominantly patriarchal with women relegated to the sidelines. As a result, the womenfolk have remained backward. Even if aspirations run high, the force of tradition constrains them. We have been working with adolescent girls to better understand this issue. While not clear of the sequence of activities to start with, our dint of work slowly bore results as our worldview of the girls' lives improved. When Unnati ISEC decided to implement the 'Village library programme' in a few villages, it also became crucial to specifically work with girls in at least two villages. From July 2023 we started interacting with a group of girls and women aged between 15 and 25 years and residents of Januna and Khirkund khurd. This initiative was subsumed within the ongoing 'Village library programme.' The main objective of establishing the groups is to develop leadership skills among the Adivasi womenfolk. It is expected that the participating women also exchange books in the village library and write stories on tribal culture, nature, cuisine, etc. Albeit the group has not settled yet i.e., all members are not always present, the membership remains fluid in as much as other women unexpectedly turn out. New activities included crafting paper bags and garlands, providing information about the self-help group, lending books to read, narrating stories and painting. Reticent women have started expressing themselves and talk about their emotions, being, and life in general. Drawing from this experience, Unnati would guide its future direction with the girls' group.

A linguistic survey of Ashram school students

Unnati ISEC exclusively works in Adivasi areas. The languages of the Adivasi society are different from the State's Marathi. As the "multi-lingual" perspective is the overarching idea of Unnati's sphere of influence, a linguistic survey becomes a primary toolkit. In this year, a linguistic survey was commissioned for middle-school (i.e., grades 5 to 8) students after regular school classes commenced. The survey was done in the ashram schools at Shenve, Babre, Taki Plateau and Kothare hamlets. A few key observations are: 192 middle-school girls and 119 middle-school boys - averaging 12 years of age - participated in the survey. Approx 72% of the students identified themselves with the 'Thakar' tribe whilst 22% with the 'Kaatkari' tribe. Almost all i.e., 99% students could understand Marathi. On the other hand, most households spoke that language of the respective cast – koli or fisherfolk, thakar, kaatkari and vaarli. Taking cognizance of the linguistic facts, the project's policy direction will be determined.

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Pre-programme tests

In the Shahapur ashram schools, pre-test forms were filled and taken on record during the second week of September 2023. The tests are a worthy tool to assess children's progress and examine their mental health. In the assessment, 276 boy- and 340 girl-middle school students were included from Shenve, Babre, Taki Plateau and Kothare hamlets. A report is currently being developed. When the reading room programme's efficacy would be assessed at the end of the financial year (i.e., March and April), a post-test would be administered.

The 'boy – girl' distinction has evaporated



It was obvious that during the 'Shiku Anande' or 'Literacy' classes, boys and girls did not sit alongside. We had to work at different levels to correct this issue. This short tale explains. The 'Shiku Anande' classes are operational in Khirkund budruk since the last year and a half. It was then commonly observed that boys and girls do not sit together, do not converse with one another, do not tolerate an inadvertent touch. Despite attempting to dialog with the children, the situation did not alter.

This year, however, we were steadfast to navigate the change. An activity was orchestrated. The children's name tags were turned upside down and placed in a large circle on the floor. Each child was requested to stand facing a tag. Once the facilitator instructed the group, each kid overturned the tag, called out the name, and ushered that person – boy or girl – to come and sit down. Each kid now had an appointed place randomly dictated by an overturned name tag! The facilitator guided each kid to regularly occupy this rightful seat. However, the children were not ready for this change; from the next day they insisted on continuing with the original seating arrangement. The facilitator had to hold on to her horses, and for many days. A firm dialog with the children continued for days. After about a month of steadfast dialog and firm ground, glimpses of success were seen. At this instance, boys and girls intermingle and work in groups. The gender distinction has evaporated.

Unnati's "Village Connect" programme

Unnati's Akola team organized a townhall congregation at vantage locations in four of the five Adivasi villages. The team presented a 'street' theatrical performance that emphasized upon children's learning losses and safety arising from parents' migration. Women and menfolk as well as children from the village were among the audience. The theatrical performance was appreciated with a request for an encore performance.



Discussing lesson plan with teachers

To inform the teachers our mother-tongue based learning methods and with the broad objective of exchanging ideas and information, this activity requires a sharing with primary school teachers. Currently the interaction happens every Monday having started from the third week of September 2023. The meeting lasts for about twenty minutes in the schools of Khirkund budruk, Januna and Dangarkhed. Discussions are centered around planning, coursework, special tales, sharing of learning material and problem solving. The dialog often focuses on or two topics.

Staff capacity building

During the quarter ended September 30, 2023, fifteen colleagues from the Akola and Shahapur project areas benefited from ten training sessions. Of these, nine training sessions were delivered by external faculty/ institutions. Sessions and workshops around varied themes like i) Sociolinguistic Survey ii) MLE and Children's Literature' iii) Organizational development iv) Toward a happy learning experience v) Library Educators' course vi) A hand of friendship to the library vii) Introduction to libraries viii) A rising revolution called the library ix) Training on reading rooms were delivered by organizations such as a) MLE Collective, b) Pravaha (Delhi), c) Eklavya (Bhopal), d) Khelghar Palaniti (Pune), e) Parag (Bhopal), f) The Free Library Network, g) Vandana Kulkarni (Pune). Unnati ISEC's own faculty trained Akola—based participants on 'Gender Sensitivity' over two days.

Literacy day

Unnati ISEC works on the development of literacy and education rooted in the approach of multi-lingual education. As a natural extension, Unnati ISEC celebrates "Literacy Day" in multiple ways. From 9 to 12 September, the "Literacy Day" event was conducted in four hamlets namely Koha, Januna, Khirkund khurd and Khirkund budruk. In a 'Nook Reading' event, parents and other readers read out text at the open space. Some of the books read from were grandma's home, a girl who did not read, women power for the society, imagining success, dots of light. A novel method of communicating 'Literacy Day' was thus instituted.

And I changed from within...

My name is Shanta Khoté. When the book exchange started in our village, I had borrowed a book. While still being a reader, I started a paid job with Unnati ISEC as a 'Village Pal' or 'Gaav Mitra.' Initially I visited Khirkund khurd to learn about the 'Gaav Mitra' role, where I met with Dnyaneshwari Tai who administered the book exchange programme. She would converse with and encourage visitors to become readers. My spirits were raised. In time, that is from July 2023, I came to run the book exchange programme. My path was not straightforward; I often erred at writing simple text like a book borrower's name. However, over time I am less prone to commit errors as my writing has improved. In fact, readers often open their hearts while talking to me to topics of home and hearth. Now I am familiar with names of persons whom I did not know before. I have come to become fond of the book exchange. Some readers cite references from the book – an aspect I love to discuss. I feel that I have changed within. Doubts have vanished, I am more assured.

-- Shanta Khote, a village worker.



And children now enjoy the coursework

When we proposed reading and writing intervention for grade 5 students at the Babré hamlet, we had assessed the reading capacity of the students. It was observed that even basic alphabets could not be recognized. We identified 30 such learning-deficient kids from grades 5 and 6, however we chose to work closely on improving the basics with grade 5 students. Most either did not know to recognize basic alphabets or only cursorily recognized them. This interventional exercise started in the last week of July 2023. Students were split into groups to devote special attention to the coursework. The excitement among students during these sessions is evident. Kids volunteered to receive more course- and home-work and reading assignments. An improvement was palpable among the kids during the fortnight or so. Those who were unaware of basic alphabets now recognize more than twelve alphabets. Vowels and script syntax are now their familiar. In summary, the students now like their books and enjoy playing with the alphabets. The quest to the reading room will start soon.



Children of Babre taking interest in reading



Children observing the human body trap

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