

# **“Education Cannot Wait, Act Now”**

## **Context**

The closure of 1.5 million schools due to the pandemic and lockdowns in 2020 has impacted 247 million children enrolled in elementary and secondary schools. In addition, there are over six million girls and boys who were already out of school even before the COVID-19 crisis began. Globally, schools for more than 168 million children have been entirely closed for almost a full year (UNICEF)

Unfortunately, India has the most extended school closure period due to the pandemic only after Uganda. The central and state government adopted online methods, but due to the existing digital divide many children are deprived of access to online education. Most students did not have devices or struggled with devices to access education. The Parliamentary Standing Committee report said, “about 70% of the country does not have access to internet connectivity, and available quality of connectivity is poor ” it shows the huge digital divide existing in India. The media reports say that in Odisha, out of around 60 lakhs elementary school students, only 22 lakhs accessed online education provided by the state government. Further, even having a device at home does not guarantee access to devices for children for academic purposes.

The deep impact of the school closure is on the learning losses of the children. It has taken them back in their academic level. Every parent, teacher knows this but to substantiate the claim the study finding of Azim Premji University can be mentioned here. The University conducted a study in January 2021 of over 16,000 children across 5 states in Class 11 to VI and found that 92% of the children had lost at least one specific language ability from the previous year and 82% had lost at least one mathematical ability.

## **Who are we?**

Atmashakti Trust is registered at Delhi. Working in collaboration with local people’s collectives in the state of Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh in the most remote locations. We cover more than 1.5 million households directly in those areas. The domain area of our working has been bridging the gap between the Government and the entitlement holders. The need of the people of our working area and of collectives has been our primary focus. It may be right to food, right to employment for rural poor, right to safe drinking water or right of people over natural resources. During the Corona pandemic the organization realized that rural education is the sector which has suffered more than anything else as schools were the first to be closed to contain the deadly virus. We launched several advocacy activities to sensitize the Government to take initiative for offline classes in smaller groups as digital education was a complete failure. The Govt of Odisha took some steps at different points of time due to our consistent outcry on the issue like introduction of Shikshya Samparka Karyakram, Alternative Learning and Mentorship Program. Under our Mo Chatashalee, a community driven voluntary initiative to teach rural kids we covered more than 1 lakh students and around 6500 volunteers were engaged in this process. The mental health of children was another important aspect of lockdown. We carried out a 25 days long campaign

called Gunjara, a campaign on wheels covering more than 4500 km and 25 districts of the state. This created lots of hue and cry in the media and Government of Odisha issues specifications to deal with joyful learning, helpline numbers were issued to counsel the students and teachers, learning recovery plans were made post opening of schools. It is also learned from various studies that recovery plans taken up are not sufficient.

### **Why is it important now :**

The age of primary education is crucial for the psycho-sociological growth of children. Its foundation for academic success in a higher level of education is made at the primary level. More than two years are lost for children. Due to the closure of schools, the learning outcomes of children are negatively impacted. Children are deprived of growth and development. The literacy gain is getting slower due to closure.

Children and adolescents will likely experience high rates of depression and anxiety long after the current lockdown and social isolation. According to the review published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, lonely young people might be as much as three times more likely to develop depression in the future than others, and the impact of loneliness on mental health could last for at least 9 years. It's time we engage children without further delay in educational activities to avoid loneliness and ensure social assimilation.

There have been media reports that children have been pushed through domestic work, and farm work and subject to violence during the lockdown period. The incidence of child marriage is also being reported in various rural parts. Educational engagement is necessary to ensure child rights and protect them from atrocities.

The quality of learning output standard-wise has always been lower than expected. The economic hardship faced by parents due to the lockdown has forced them to cut the expenses on the education of their children. In such a scenario, the poorest of students studying in public schools will suffer more than anyone else.

### **Can the learning losses be recovered?**

It is possible to recover the learning losses partially if not in totality. The Azim Prem Ji University conducted the study between January to April 2022 covering 108 students, as many as schools and 1644 students in classes 2 to 5 in 41 districts across 5 states to capture the efforts of teachers to capture the recovery of learning losses due to school closure during the pandemic.

The overall findings of the study endorse that continuous high engagement efforts by committed teachers in the public school system does have a positive effect in recovery of the learning loss. However, the study also cautions that this is too little, with a significant percentage of students still unable to reach earlier class-level abilities even with such committed efforts. Given the widespread and deep effects of school closure on learning levels of students, the study recommends a more sustained long-term effort by the entire public school system to focus on the recovery of learning loss.

The sample was taken for selected teachers, it is also seen that some state governments have designed and rolled out programs that encapsulates the essence of these efforts. For example, the Government of Odisha squeezed the last summer vacation and asked the teachers to teach students in small groups in the morning and evening classes. They have also launched a three month long learning recovery plan which is ongoing after schools are opened from 10th October 2022. The study further says, they will need to ensure effective operationalizing of these efforts over the next 12-18 months, while other states will have to adapt existing or initiate new programmes to ensure learning loss is adequately addressed.

The challenges for recovering losses post pandemic is enormous as it has impacted all stakeholders like Students, Parents, Teachers and School Management. The impact of it is multifaceted like learning losses, mental health issues, increasing absentee and drop out.

### **What is the Process?**

To address all these aspects, a campaign called “ Education Cannot Wait, Act Now” is designed to be carried out in 6 states of India namely Odisha, Chatishgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Internationally also some similar geographies and socio economic conditions will be covered. The campaign will start from 15th November 2022 and will conclude on 10th December 2022. During the campaign, fact-finding will be done to assess the present conditions on the issues identified. The fact-finding team will visit villages, meet students, teachers, parents and school management committee and collect the information. Consultations with NGOs working in the field, academicians, primary stakeholders will be organized to ascertain the pertinent condition. Subsequently, a set of recommendations will be formulated after a series of discussions with parents, students, SMC members, educational administrators, PRI members and the same will be communicated to concerned authorities and policymakers. The resolution will be made in 2000 selected villages by the community to solve the issues related to learning recovery, improvement in school infrastructure, and to curb dropout and migration.

<b>Action/Events</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Inauguration and orientation about the campaign	15th Nov to 20th Nov
Fact Finding from the children, school and other stakeholders	21st Nov to 28th Nov
Recommendation Collection from stakeholders	29th Nov to 1st Dec
Village resolution for the development of villages	2nd Dec to 5th Dec
Report analysis, feedback and recommendation preparation from academicians and practitioners	6th and 7th Dec

Report sharing and panel discussion	8th Dec
Advocacy with Political Leaders, Policy Makers and Celebration of Human Rights Day	9th and 10th Dec

### **How will Change look like**

- The rural community of 13 districts is more sensitized and taking an active part in the campaign
- The parents are actively participating in a minimum of 2000 school management. Taking extra care of their children so that they can recover their learning losses.
- The Odisha Government is reviewing its learning recovery plan, and revised orders are issued to the schools.
- The state governments of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh are initiating a learning recovery plan for their children.
- The students are attending classes regularly and dropped out are coming back to schools
- The infrastructure of the schools is improving from the present condition and is at par with prescribed RTE norms.