

The background of the cover is a photograph of three children. In the foreground, a young boy with dark hair and a light blue shirt is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. Behind him, slightly out of focus, are two other children, a girl and a boy, both smiling. The top of the cover has a solid blue band containing the title and issue information.

SHIV NADAR FOUNDATION

THE FOUNDATION POST

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Technology & Excitement

The New Building Blocks of
Rural Education

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Letter from the Editorial Desk

For a country where a majority of people live in villages, the health of rural education is in a critical condition. Recently a report published by the NGO Pratham, called ASER (The Annual Status of Education Report) put out interesting and alarming statistics about rural education in India – a staggering 70% of standard III students cannot solve 2-digit subtraction problems and almost 50% of standard V students cannot read a standard II level text! Lack of quality learning environment, teacher training, motivation, teaching infrastructure, etc. are just some of the issues that continue to plague education in rural schools.

We all realize that demographics should not define a child's intrinsic emotion of curiosity – to know why, what and how. Curiosity as a behaviour is the driving force behind not only human development, but also developments in science, language, and industry. Unfortunately our villages are not fully equipped to satiate this curiosity.

More often than not, kids in rural areas have tremendous raw potential – what we call 'street smartness' in our urban parlance. Imagine how they can evolve if provided with the right education and guidance to build their talents. The most intelligent children in a rural setup don't end up getting even a fraction of the exposure that an urban child of the same calibre might, because our rural schools are not equipped to provide a conducive environment for holistic learning. So the question remains, how can we encourage the rural students who are hungry to be educated and enable them to realize their potential?

This is a theme we explore in this issue of The Foundation Post. At the end of the day, the thirst for knowledge itself drives us to learn and grow. And this is the thirst we want to awaken across our rural schools as well, by inculcating the joy of learning and passion for teaching.



Tapping Technology – The Next Frontier in Rural Education

Students at a Shiksha Initiative School

Technology has no doubt emerged as one of the foremost ways to connect and empower the rural populace – exposing them to better information, spreading awareness and building communities. And as the key centers of learning in rural setup, schools play an important role in ingraining technology into the people's day-to-day lives. This is one of the biggest driving forces behind Shiksha Initiative – an intervention for Indian rural schools, based on technology-enabled learning to improve the quality of education imparted in classrooms.

It started in 2010 when a motley group of academicians, IT professionals and intellectuals got together with the aim to devise something to help eradicate illiteracy from the country. Bringing together Shiv Nadar Foundation's expertise in transformational education and HCL's technology prowess, the discussions centered on how technology could be used to enhance learning in classrooms, specifically the delivery of education to increase literacy levels and in the long term, eradicate illiteracy. This was the genesis of Shiksha Initiative.

The Early Days

The task was not a simple one. The team behind Shiksha Initiative spent 5 laborious years testing and developing the program. Initially, it was

HCL Learning, an arm of HCL that works with education and training requirements in urban schools, which stepped in to create content. Most of the English content was dubbed into Hindi and the first technology-



abled session was tested in a rural school at Noida in 2010. There were many practical lessons that emerged from it – What kind of content worked best? And what was the most apt way to deliver it?

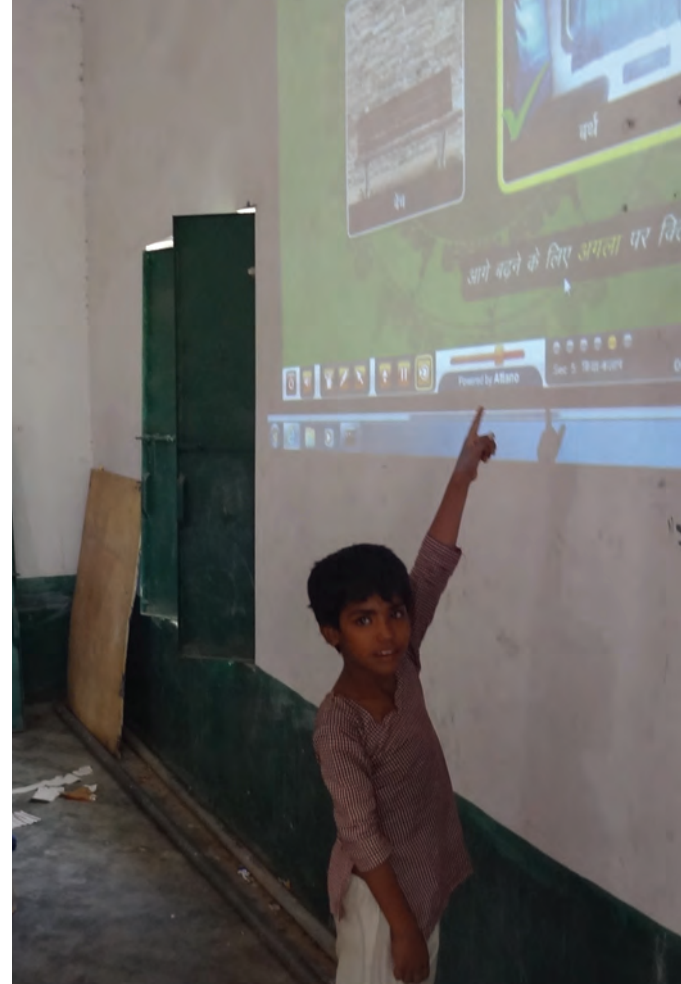
Clearly, content and technology were the two main pillars to build the initiative further. Both needed a well-defined strategy – first, create content that would complement teachers, rather than replace them; and second, deliver it through technology that is minimalist for ease of use and transition. After 2 years of intensive workshops with experts from across technology and education, Shiksha Initiative was ready to be rolled out in the first 4 schools in Uttar Pradesh.

The Founding Team

What lie right at the core of the Shiksha Initiative are the people who have built it from scratch. After 2 years of intensive learning and strategizing, Shiksha Initiative appointed a team of 4 – experienced professionals in the field of rural education – to spearhead the on-ground execution in the first 4 schools in Uttar Pradesh. The team was trained in ICT-based teaching, a mammoth task of teaching computers to those who had never even touched them before. And the initiative was officially kicked off in 2012.

Shiksha Initiative – towards technology enhanced learning

Today, Shiksha Initiative reaches 340+ schools in Uttar Pradesh, touching the lives of over 15,000 students. It operates in 40 schools through its own teachers; these are referred to as Open Labs, where new content and tools are experimented with, as there is higher control. In another 300 schools, Shiksha Initiative trains the existing teachers in content and delivery.



Student at a rural school learning through interactive videos

In its current avatar, Shiksha Initiative has completely digitized the UP board curriculum for grades 1 and 2.

From 4 schools in 2012 to 340 in 2016, Shiksha Initiative has made a tremendous journey in less than 4 years. Till 2014, the initiative was focused on testing the concept; today the team is working on replication and scalability. The initiative is still in its nascent stages, but scaling up rapidly. These schools are Shiksha's litmus test before taking this digital revolution to thousands of schools. The program hopes to partner with the Government in the future and make it replicable as a model initiative for the government to carry forward across rural schools.

Behind this commendable task lies a highly motivated team

The Shiksha structure



that has time and again gone out of its way; finding hands-on solutions to on-ground problems such as storage of equipment; or walking miles to

communicate with families and communities to tell them about the initiative, and encouraging them to send their children to school. For the team of Shiksha Initiative working across rural UP today, this is no longer just a job, but a commitment, a vision to “eradicate illiteracy in India”.

What's in a Story? Students of Shiv Nadar School celebrate storytelling at the Kahaani Festival

The Kahaani Festival was hosted by the Shiv Nadar School, Gurgaon, on the 16th and 17th of October, 2015. It is in line with the endeavour of the Shiv Nadar School to expose students to progressive, out-of-classroom learning experiences and help them identify their hidden talents. In the two-day festival, over 23 storytellers and artists conducted around 80 sessions of theatre, puppetry,

magic shows, acapella, cartoon making, air-yoga, etc. The eminent guests included Tom Alter, Jeeva Raghunath, Dadi Pudumjee and Nathu Lal Solanki. The festival attracted over 4000 visitors, including students from other schools. It concluded to a great audience response, with wide media coverage in all major national dailies, like Deccan Herald, The Hindu and Times of India.



Performance at Kahaani Festival



Veteran artist Tom Alter at Shiv Nadar School



Performance at Kahaani Festival

Shiv Nadar University's First Convocation

The Shiv Nadar University held its first convocation on October 31, 2015, awarding degrees to its founding batch of students. Chief Economic Advisor, Government of India, Dr Arvind Subramanian and Dr Raj Reddy, the Moza Bint Nasser University Professor of Computer Science and Robotics in the School of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University, presided over the convocation as Guests of Honour.

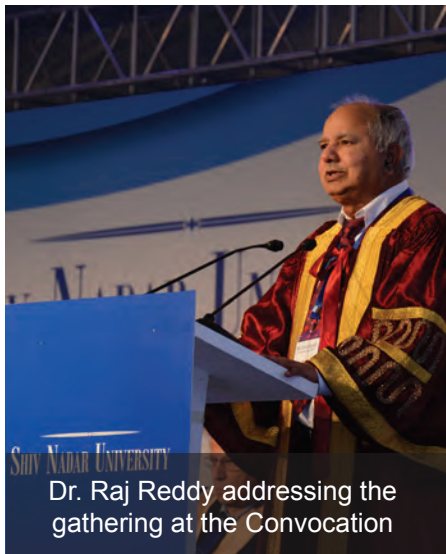
The University also awarded honorary doctoral degrees to three stalwarts in their respective fields — Fakir Chand Kohli, a Padma Bhushan awardee who is hailed as the father of the Indian IT industry; S. H. Raza, a Padma Vibhushan awardee and one of India's greatest icons of modern and contemporary art;



Dr. Arvind Subramanian addressing the students

and Ashoke Sen, a Padma Bhushan recipient and world renowned theoretical physicist.

31 students from the class of 2015 have been selected for



Dr. Raj Reddy addressing the gathering at the Convocation



Students of the graduating batch

higher studies by leading universities like Cornell, Columbia, New York University, Dartmouth, RMIT, Delhi School of Economics and Georgetown University. 95% of the batch has been recruited by organisations like Amazon, PWC, Cognizant, Tata, L&T, Shapoorji Pallonji, Dell and Schneider, among others.

President of India dedicates Shiv Nadar University to the Nation

On the 18th of January, 2016, the Hon'ble President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee visited the Shiv Nadar University and dedicated the University to the nation, calling it 'an institute of national significance.' He also laid the foundation stone of the University's residential complex.

Speaking on the occasion, the Hon'ble President, Shri

Pranab Mukherjee said, "The most prestigious and reputed universities globally have been built on the fundamental pillars of excellence – meritocracy, flexibility to explore, freedom to challenge oneself and grow from failure, and most importantly, innovation and research. In a relatively short span of time, the Shiv Nadar University has emerged as one of India's leading private

universities. I believe the Shiv Nadar University will emerge as a landmark institution, critical to nation building in the 21st century and beyond and in time, will also take its rightful place among the pantheon of great universities of the world. It is my honour to dedicate the Shiv Nadar University to the nation."



Hon'ble President of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee inaugurating the Shiv Nadar University

Injecting the Joy of Learning in Rural Classrooms

Education is regarded as one of the most powerful tools to transform individuals, communities and countries as it provides us the basic means to lead an impactful and aspirational life. When considered as a fundamental life-altering force, one can see that education cannot be equated with merely attending school, but truly engaging with the learning that a school has to offer. In an urban society, we are able to accomplish this through established systems of formal education, with structured curricula and sophisticated methods of teaching. But as we move into the rural hinterlands of our country, this structure begins to disintegrate.

There is no denying that Government interventions have tremendously increased the number of schools across rural India, boosting enrolment and bringing children back to rural schools with better amenities. Today, as per publicly available Government data, almost 96% of rural children in the age group of 6-14 years are enrolled in schools. Despite these impressive numbers, the more critical questions are what exactly are these children learning in school, how effective is it and are they excited about what they are learning?



Students in a rural primary school in Uttar Pradesh

When it comes to rural education, most initiatives today are still incentive-driven, but there is a fundamental challenge that continues to hinder the efficacy of such programs - the absence of motivation among teachers, which has a ripple effect on children's motivation and interest level in learning at school.

Teachers in rural schools are often inadequately trained, overworked with many different responsibilities or just absent. In many rural schools, teachers have to often take up multiples roles, such as administering mid-day meals, assisting in immunization programs, aiding healthcare, social awareness etc. The teacher to student ratio is extremely steep, with many teachers taking on multiple grades and subjects to fill the need. More often than not, a teacher may not even have the resources to assist in classes, apart from the mere chalks and blackboards. When compared with urban schools, which have now moved to digitized interactive content, such basic amenities are no longer sufficient.

It is time we recognise teachers for what they are – one of the most important stakeholders in the rural education landscape, as they have a huge impact on children and effectively on any program or intervention geared towards them. Parents in rural areas are not educated enough to teach or mentor their children at home post school and thus, the role of teachers in a rural setup transforms from being a mere disseminator of information to a life-coach with the school becoming a sanctuary of learning rather than just a building.



Students studying in a rural primary school

So it is important that we build a stimulating and encouraging environment in these schools, one of the key factors overlooked by most rural intervention programs. And as is evident in programs being run in urban schools, technology can play a crucial role in facilitating this. Technology-aided learning is a great way to inculcate the joy of learning among children and is known to capture interest quicker and for longer.

For teachers, technology can help evolve and support their role, with better teaching and learning material. Internet opens an array of online training so teachers can train themselves and gain higher authority and autonomy in the system. Better training also effectively shifts the focus to quality, encouraging teachers to introduce new teaching methods in their classes, towards building students' attention and concentration in class. Technology offers opportunities for e-learning and distance education,

bringing better quality study material and learning to rural students. Imagine, a child sitting in a village in Haryana and participating in a seminar in Delhi virtually. Such is the power of technology in assisting education.

Digital technology-driven learning is not just another amenity for a rural classroom; it can help radically transform the way children learn, how much they learn and how much fun they have while learning, enabling higher retention. Education at the end of the day does not end at textbook learning, it should build curiosity and encourage students to question and think. A holistic education would build holistic individuals, a crying need for rural India with its social, linguistic, economic and other challenges. Educated children in these communities can help mitigate many such challenges. And the first step towards this would be to bring back the joy of learning in the rural classrooms.



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