

## *The Gandhian Odyssey: 9 months into Gandhi Fellowship*

### **General Induction**



Udaipur-Dungarpur Gandhi Fellows Batch 9

Our journey began on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, 2016 with a General Induction in the form of a boot camp, where the entire Udaipur-Dungarpur team of Batch 9 (2016-2018) interacted for the first time. What followed in the 7 days was a life-changing experience. We were introduced to concepts such as Non-Violent Communication (NVC), as the primary means of communication, skills of Empathy, tools such as TIPPS (Teacher Instructional Practices and Processes Systems) as a method of classroom observation of teacher-student transaction, shot videos of ourselves following the OFNR (Observation, feeling, Need, Request) format of NVC on real life case studies, in short, prepared ourselves for the highly challenging and enjoyable work that was set in store for us for the rest of the journey. Reflecting back, I realised about the set of values that were inculcated within us, how efficiently one can learn within a span of a week if the planning and strategising is done right, and the spirit of team bonding and the culture of unity which we were helped to build within ourselves. What resulted was, in a span of 7 days, 23 unknown kids from different parts of the country, rooting for one cause, one mission and a single vision: to create a significant change in the primary education system of the country, became a tight-knit family.

## Field Support



Cleanliness drive in school

The most engaging process in the life of a fellow is the Field Support (FS), be it school visit or community interaction. What one realises is the school is an integral part of the community. The School Management Committee (SMC), the governing body of every government school is specifically comprised of both teachers and parents, who meet on a monthly basis to discuss about the issues faced by the school and how to come up with constructive solutions to deal with them. 1 month into FS, I faced a certain amount of disillusionment with the education system of our country. Hailing from a strikingly different background, Field Support opened my eyes into the stark realities of the grassroots level. Children walked on an average of 5 kms to school everyday, sat in classrooms with no electricity, wore the same single school uniform everyday, and became more than happy to have a 'didi' interacting with them, simply being in their midst. Some of the many observations and interventions made are as follows:

- There is a sizeable number of non-readers of all classes in all my five schools. There is an interest in learning but inability to follow classroom teaching due to constraints to provide individual care and attention by teachers. One of the methods I have regularly practiced with non-readers to help them learn to read and write is by the whole language approach. In a span of six regular interventions in the schools, non-readers were able to identify letters and their respective phonemes, read and write their names before learning other words. Being able to write their own names gives them a sense of identity and constructs their primary association with the written language. It is essential that each kid feels at par with the other, whilst the facilitator/teacher bears in mind the strengths and weaknesses of every individual child so as to work upon them.





Peer learning through the help of Barkha books

- There exist hierarchies within the four walls of the classroom where non-readers are seated at the back in contrast to the academic performers in the front. Being boosted with self confidence on being able to read and write, most started interacting with academic achievers, thereby breaking said classroom hierarchies. They felt at par with each other and equally capable of achievement.



Activities based on Barkha books

- Non-functional libraries: Books in schools were kept in racks or cupboards but were not in use. I managed to activate libraries through the usage of Barkha books (thin illustrated level-wise booklets distributed by the state government in primary schools), where a good reader and a weak reader sat with each other and read. This established an environment of peer learning

where one helped the other to read and comprehend. There were also activities where children had to paint a picture of their own interpretation of the story in the booklet. In addition, the recent block initiative of the Library Campaign spread the message of significance of functional libraries far and wide. We distributed books gifted by our organization to schools to put them in good use and helped create awareness on the importance of reading.



Recently established library in school from gifted books by Piramal Foundation

- Gender inequity: There were defined gender specific roles and behavioral attitudes in schools and homes. I identified the need to sensitize children so as to help them understand the impending change they will need to bring about when they grow up. To study further, I had conducted a written subjective survey with class 8 students in the Upper Primary Schools I have been given (3 out of 5 schools). The survey contained 20 questions dealing with sensitivity of feelings, emotions and thoughts about themselves and towards the opposite sex. The objective has been to understand the mindset of adolescent children in a particular terrain and the factors affecting them, whether it's generic to their age or specific to their rural set up and so on. The results were then discussed with the teachers who developed

an in depth understanding of the psychological framework of the children. I helped devise strategies with the teachers which they incorporated while teaching to break certain stereotypical notions and conventions prevalent in the society. Different perspectives on every single question in the survey have generated a huge amount of data which is in the process of thorough analysis. A simple example would be : on the question 'Aap ko lagta hai ki ladke ko rona thik hai?' (Do you think it is okay for boys to cry?), 37 students out of a total of 52 has replied with a No, only 6 children (5 girls, 1 boy) said Yes and the rest 9 either agreed to both or were undecided. The reasons behind their replies which constituted the next question are extremely subjective and varied, providing multiple perspectives but concluding at a single thought process.

This has only been a small start towards creating sensitized children. Another small, measurable impact would be an intense amount of emotional upheaval, in the form of sudden shedding of tears (by boys) about long pent up grieves, after a session of one-on-one dialoguing and classroom interaction on the importance of expression of feelings and emotions by both genders. It simply established how children are pressurized to conform to specific gender roles and stereotyping right from the beginning of childhood and the amount of pressure it creates. It is important for all of us, specifically those associated with the education sector to realize that a healthy mental and emotional being is as important as high knowledge and good scores. In fact, the former is a prerequisite for achieving the latter.

- After 9 months of regular class room teaching, I came to the understanding that Inquiry Based learning (IBL) is one of the most effective means of explanation of higher concepts to children. In my interventions, I have practiced IBL by essentially incorporating the method of scaffolding where through a variety of instructional techniques during classroom transaction, students move progressively from simple to complex thinking. IBL particularly helps to create the base of such a process where learning occurs through self inquiry, through carefully structured questions posed to children which direct them towards a certain understanding. The objective is to put a particular query/occurrence before them and help them question ways to move towards a solution by negating every incorrect possibility and thereby reaching the correct understanding or conclusion. It aims towards making children capable of independent thinking by generating self formulated questions, and applying real life logic in learning concepts.

## **Community Immersion**





Community interactions

Community Immersion is one of the most exciting processes of this Fellowship Program where a fellow is given the opportunity to stay in one of the five communities for a month (Dec, 2016), live the life of the people in the community in order to understand the real life problems of the people and come up with solutions to counter the problems. Upon climbing mountains and overcoming barriers of the spoken tongue, engaging in discussions with parents about their kids' growth and wives about their married lives, I came to the conclusion on the 10th day of my CI in the village of Nimboda in Sarada, that I needed a platform to address several issues, particularly to the youth. This need for a space gave birth to what the kids liked to call "Saraswati Bhavan", their very own learning centre (location: Panchayat Bhavan, courtesy: Sarpanch of Nimboda Panchayat). It has essentially been need-based, catered to a wide range of children of every age, of every section of the society and coming from the private to the government schools.



With the 'Lohars' (Blacksmiths)



Favourite hangout zone!

For the 16 days it has run, there has been an enrollment of 94 children (of classes KG to 8) and 12 volunteers (from classes 9, 10 and 12). The volunteers catered to the needs of the children while two retired Headmasters (teachers of language and science) catered to the needs of the volunteers. Averages of 50 children and 4 volunteers have come everyday, which would result in a total of 64 (16 days x 4 volunteers) men days. The issues my volunteers and I as a team have dealt with are specifically of 3 kinds:

1. Pedagogical
2. Health, hygiene and sanitation
3. Gender sensitization; breaking boundaries

Elaborating,

\* We have extensively working to achieve the MLL (Minimum Learning Level), specifically of class 5 which is to cover the Skill of Operations (Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication and Division) in Math and reading, writing and comprehension in Language. It has been our goal that every 1st and 2nd standard students have proper knowledge of Number Sense, 3rd and 4th to be able to grasp the concept and cover simple sums of Operations, while every student of the 5th class enrolled should be able to attempt and solve the complex ones. Similar planning went for Language too.



Volunteer children interaction to achieve MLLs in Language and Math

\* The focus was specifically on skill based learning and level wise learning as has been prescribed by CCE. The volunteers had succeeded in identifying the non-aligned (non-readers) from amongst all the classes. They were tended to by two girls who themselves volunteered to be working with them. We have strived to have every individual need addressed.



Journey from being a non-reader to reader

\* A fine peer learning environment had been established which has been my reason to include a diverse range of students. Higher classes helped lower ones, private school kids interacted with government school kids, one child supported and capacitated the other.





Peer learning

Secondly, there arose the issue of health and sanitation. As a village, the entire community alongwith the Sarpanch has been working towards making Nimboda open defecation free (ODF) under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan of the central government. So when my volunteers conducted amongst themselves a meeting and discussed with me on how we need to have a session on the importance of good health and proper sanitation, I integrated the Swachh Bharat Mission alongwith personal hygiene into the module. The first half of the session was a group painting activity on what the kids conceived of the Swachh Bharat campaign going on in their village. In the second half, we tried to generate a discourse among the children on the need to keep themselves and their environment clean and an awareness on how diseases spread due to open defecation. At the end of it all, they were convinced of the need of an HHIL (Household Individual Latrine) and how they will do their bit to convince their parents to construct one from the fund of Rs 12,000 provided by the local Panchayat.



Group painting activity on sanitation and hygiene

One of my best moments, however, remain to be the one when one day, one of the volunteers, a girl of class 12 had suddenly exclaimed how the gendered divisions of boys and girls sitting separately needed to break. I was delighted. My team of volunteers was convinced that the kids need to reshuffle their places, and finally the seating arrangement was girl+boy+girl+boy... I initially sensed discomfort, shyness and apprehension among the children. But the impact it created within a few days was tremendous. It not only broke boundaries of gender, but peer learning had reached an all new level. Shyness and non-interaction between boys and girls had disappeared and I have been a witness to watching the boundaries of class, caste and sex disintegrate in an environment of knowledge and learning.



Reshuffling of seating arrangement to girl+boy+girl+boy...to break class, caste and sex boundaries

As this centre had been established and run as a need based institution, the plan for the next one month was solely to provide pedagogical support through teachers, retired HMs and myself (as far as I can) to my volunteers and their peers preparing for the 10th and 12th boards. Later, they will continue supporting the children. Baal Geets had become an absolute favourite and were sung regularly, while movies have been screened.



Volunteer preparation for 10<sup>th</sup> board



Baal Geet in progress!





Movie screening of 'Nil Battey Sannata'

### **This is just the beginning...**

Over the past 9 months as a Gandhi fellow, I realized the journey is never-ending. The impact each one of us strives to create through every single process of this fellowship journey is one that will last a lifetime, way beyond the scope of 2 years. It has the scope to potentially transform your life. This article has been able to throw some light on three of the major processes that shaped me as a person. There are so many more areas like living with my co-fellows, conducting capacity building workshops for teachers and HMs as well as for ourselves, our Learning Curriculum which helps us develop a concrete understanding on leadership and the education system, conducting assessments and analyzing Big Data, the daily Strategic Time-Outs with our team and so on which have contributed to our growth and knowledge-building in every way possible. I have seen my own transformation where I have been able to bridge the gap between being a thinker and a doer. So here I am eagerly waiting for so many more possibilities of learning to unfold within the next 14 months...



First field visit of our new collaborative team project on water-shed management in Khodi Maudi village (April, '17)