

## Abhyudaya School: Inclusion of Agro-Centric Primary Education in Rural India

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### Abstract

Indian civilization has an illustrious past in the domains of education, culture, and arts. However, the current education system in the country is largely a mirror of the colonial period. This has resulted in a gaping difference between rural and urban education systems as far as their relevance is concerned. India being an agrarian economy, the major occupation was agriculture. After the 'mixed economy' policy of the first prime minister of independent India, agriculture and farming have taken a backseat. We have experienced that higher education and professional degrees leading to good jobs in industry and services have not persuaded young people to consider agriculture as an occupation or profession. In addition, the complete dependence of the farmers on environmental variables has brought hardship in their lives. Currently, none of the primary schools teach agriculture or farming as a subject. This has created indifference to these subjects amongst students except for those who intend to pursue agriculture for graduate and post-graduate studies. This qualitative research aims to understand and discuss an innovative idea that is being nurtured in the field of agro-centric primary education called *Abhyudaya* Global Village School (AGVS). Situated in the city of Nagpur, in the state of Maharashtra in India, the school has initiated this endeavor for the children of farmers and farm laborers. AGVS integrates a study of effective agricultural practices in a scientific manner to build a positive attitude towards agriculture and envisions a generation of financially sustainable 'agri-preneurs' in the future.

**Key Words:** Agro-centric school, Rural India, Primary education, Agri-preneurs

## Introduction

Ancient India is known for its rich academic pursuits. Nalanda, Taxshashila, and Ujjaini were names of famous Indian universities, which stand testimony to the fact, where thousands of students from all over the world came to study. Mention of these is found in the writings of the various ancient travelers to India.

However, the education system today in the country is a reflection of colonial times. As Vasavi et al. (1997) explain:

The British administrative approach to education focused on supply-side factors like increasing the number of schools, establishing pre-service training centers, control through the inspection system, and so on. The limitations of this approach have been exposed by the persistence of the problems of illiteracy, poor grade completion rates, and high proportion of girls in the category of the 'never-enrolled' and weak participation of social groups that had traditionally been outside the formal education system (p. 3181).

Despite these educational shortcomings, India has made tremendous economic progress in the last 20 years. There has been an increase in job opportunities and disposable income which has led to a higher standard of living. However, much of the development is skewed in favor of the urban areas. Rural regions have not seen a proportionate increase in career opportunities or standard of living. As a result, there is a constant exodus of rural youth to nearby cities, leaving their families and agricultural land abandoned. However, in most cases, cities fail to offer any meaningful and dignified job opportunities to the rural migrants. This leads to a large number of disappointed young people who struggle to make ends meet and lead a dignified life. Another problem for rural youth is that the current education system in India is largely theory-based and is irrelevant to life in rural areas. In order to solve the problem, the migration of youth from rural to urban areas has to be controlled. One of the ways in which this can be achieved is by educating children in the villages, developing their skill-sets and abilities to help them realize the vast opportunities and possibilities they have within a stone's throw of their homes in and around their very own agricultural fields.

This case study is about sowing the seeds of hope to bring about a solution to these problems through an innovative means of agro-centric primary education being carried out by a school called *Abhyudaya* Global Village School (AGVS) in rural Nagpur, a city in the state of Maharashtra in India. It is an endeavor initiated especially for the children of farmers and farm labourers.

## Background

Before globalization, which took place in the late twentieth century, India was agrarian in nature, and 70 % of the people lived in villages. Globalisation accelerated the decline of agriculture and paved the path to the rise in service and industry sectors. The focus in this case study is the Nagpur region in Vidarbha in Maharashtra. (Vidarbha is one of the five administrative divisions of Maharashtra.) According to data compiled by Mallapur (2016),

As many as 3,228 farmers committed suicide in Maharashtra in 2015, the highest number since 2001, according to data tabled in the Rajya Sabha on March 4, 2016 – that is almost nine farmers every day. Vidarbha and Marathwada, with 5.7 million farmers, accounted for 83% of all farmer suicides in Maharashtra in 2015. The top five major causes of farmer suicides in 2014 were bankruptcy or indebtedness (1,163), family problems

(1,135), farming-related issues (969) -- such as failure of crops, distress due to natural calamities, inability to sell produce -- illness (745) and drug abuse and/or alcoholic addiction (250). Bankruptcy or indebtedness was also a major cause for farmer suicides (857) in Maharashtra in 2014. (p.1)

### **Method of Research**

This qualitative study has been conducted by in-depth interviews and case-study method. The sample used for these interviews were the founders, students and staff of AGVS.

### **Findings**

Famous for its sweet oranges, Nagpur, in recent years, is in the news for thousands of farmer suicides. While bankruptcies and lack of sufficient rainfall have been blamed for this disaster, lack of education is also a contributing factor. If farmers had been educated, they would have been able to turn to other meaningful occupations for financial stability, rather than opting for suicide. This study offers an interpretive perspective on an endeavor of agro-centric rural primary education, initiated in Nagpur by the members of a local family.

On 10 acres of agricultural land nestled amidst hills 45 kilometers from Nagpur near a village named Khapa, an innovative idea in primary education has taken shape. The founders of this initiative are Dr. Prakash K. Gandhi (Founder Director), his wife, Mrs. Madhuri P. Gandhi (Founder), their daughter, Mrs. Bhagyashree Gandhi Deshpande (Director Academics), and her husband, Mr. Sachin D. Deshpande (Director Administration). An idea based on the need of the hour, initiated by Dr. Prakash Gandhi, is being enthusiastically implemented by this entire family. In 2010, Dr. Gandhi thought about beginning a school where an entirely new generation would be taught in a way that the change in attitudes about farming would be steady but effective and permanent. He was aware that agriculture as a separate subject is not taught in schools in India until the graduate level. Engineers get inputs in terms of physics, chemistry, and math during secondary school education, but there are no studies that teach students to become good farmers. Moreover, how can anyone suddenly develop a passion for studying farming and agriculture when it is introduced at such a late stage of education? This realization led him to establish a school for the children of the farmers and farm labourers where agriculture and entrepreneurship are taught as part of the regular syllabus. This, he envisioned, would nurture the future agri-preneurs and enable them to understand agriculture in a more scientific manner than their parents, and would thereby assist them in becoming financially stable. Thus was born AGVS.

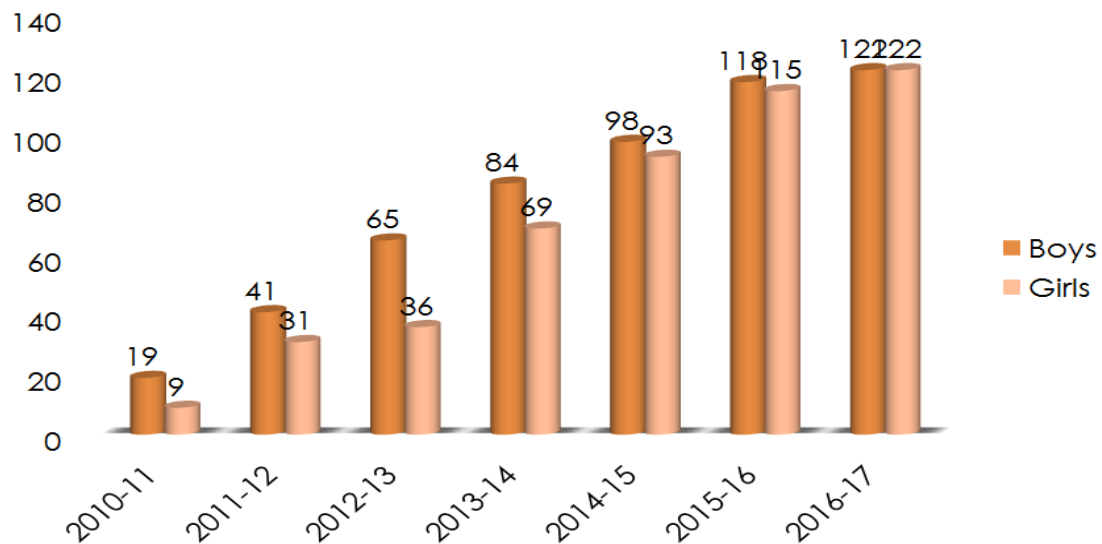
The school caters to the children of the farmers and farm labourers living within 15 kilometers of the school in the villages of Khubala, Risala, Hingna, Badegaon, Kothulna, Nimalai, Khapa, Khairee, Kochchi, Temburdoh, Khardula, Gadmi, Kirnapur, Dafai, and Dakara. The annual family income of this community of farmers and farm labourers is between \$1,500 and \$2,000 (approximately 1 lakh in INR) (as of 2015).

### **Significance and Vision of *Abhyudaya***

The meaning of *Abhyudaya* is rising Sun or Prosperity. The founders' goal is that the children of AGVS will be able to think globally and yet be rooted in Indian culture. Further, if they move out to cities for either jobs or entrepreneurial opportunities, the hope is that they will think of the development of the villages of the country. Hence the name *Abhyudaya* Global Village School. The vision is to create a global rural school where future agri-preneurs will be nurtured in an inclusive learning-friendly environment.

## Journey of AGVS

During 2010, two teachers taught 28 children, boys and girls, all in one grade. Eventually, more teachers were recruited. As financial sustainability was the priority, Dr. Gandhi found it difficult to be physically present in the school. Most of his time was spent in pursuit of raising funds; thus, the growth was slow but steady. In the fifth year of its operation, 2015, the school actively included agriculture and entrepreneurship in the daily course of study. Today, it can be called a truly agro-centric school with 14 teachers and 244 students.



**Figure 1:** Increase in AGVS student enrollment, AGVS records, 2010-2017

The school has classes from nursery to the fifth standard. AGVS follows the Maharashtra State Board Syllabus. AGVS is an educational model for the development of rural India registered under Vikalpa, as a non-profit organization with 80G and FCRA.

## Innovative Pedagogies at AGVS

One hour each day is devoted to the study of agricultural practices or actual work in the fields. Every student has to engage in working the soil, removing weeds, sowing seeds, and watering saplings, making fertilizer from compost, and pesticides in the traditional manner (i.e., grinding medicinal herbs and leaves on a stone crusher). Such hands-on activity leads to students' engagement with their work: 'This is my tree,' they proudly proclaim.

Various chapters in the students' textbooks, wherever possible, demonstrate other practical skills, such as in "Baswa's Farm," a chapter in the English text which illustrates preparation of South Indian delicacies and other foods.

To teach fundamentals of entrepreneurship, the school held a fair. This fair was different from fairs held in other schools because, here, the students were guided by the teachers to make a list of crafts they wished to create and a list of the materials needed for the creation. They then visited various shops where they practiced handling money and dealing with vendors. Having done this, the students created many artifacts from pen-stand holders and bags to wall-hangings. Two hundred and fifty visitors from the villages and 250 from Nagpur city visited the stalls created by the students. These are some of the experiential learning activities carried out at AGVS.

In recognition of the success of these pedagogies, the school has been featured in the daily newspaper *Hitwaad* and has also received the Vasundhara Mitra Award in the Vasundhara Kirloskar International Film Festival for a short documentary about AGVS.

### **Unique Features of AGVS**

- Agro-centric school – This is the only school having agriculture as a formal course of study beginning in first grade in Nagpur.
- Free education for girls - In the villages, parents deny their daughters the basic right to education. Educating a girl (who is a prospective homemaker and a progressive woman entrepreneur) is the need of the hour. Hence, keeping in sync with the Indian Government policy, AGVS has zero tuition fees for girls and highly subsidized education for boys (\$60 per boy annually).
- Emphasis on skill development.
- Other priorities – Emphasis is placed on enhancing the emotional quotient (EQ) and spiritual quotient (SQ) in addition to the intelligence quotient (IQ) of each child.

### **Challenges at AGVS**

- Teachers: Good quality teachers for a non-profit school are difficult to come across. Most current teachers come from a rural background, and very few have a passion for the profession. There is a general casual approach to this crucial element of nation building.
- Sustainability: The founders dream of making the school self-sustaining, but that will take a few more years. Until then, they need to raise and manage the funds themselves.
- Mind-set of parents and teachers: There is a need to generate awareness about the difference between conventional education and AGVS's unconventional curriculum and its significance.
- Curriculum development: This has to be implemented as a continuous process with the ever-changing needs of the larger society as well as the local farming community.
- Academic framework: Integrating agriculture and entrepreneurship with the regular syllabus is a continuing challenge.
- Parents: Most parents expect to see quick results and are sometimes not cooperative with the developmental process. Like most parents in conventional schools, many focus on marks and grades rather than learning.
- Remote location: Since the school is located on agricultural land, having a good infrastructure and procuring labour is difficult. The shuttle bus service to villages to bring children from their homes is costly.

## **Discussion**

### **Method of Addressing the Challenges**

AGVS selects teachers who are passionate about teaching. Teachers residing in the same villages as the students are preferred to ensure greater interaction outside the classroom and to enable the children to establish personal relationships with their teachers. In addition, to initiate a change in the mindset of the teachers, continuous training takes place throughout the year. The directors conduct health check-up camps to ensure families are healthy and regularly hold parent-teacher meetings to resolve issues.

To achieve sustainability, the school plans to generate income through school-run enterprises such as the fair mentioned above, a cooperative store, sale of handmade paper

products, and sale of agricultural products such as pickles, vegetables, and cotton. Seeing the enthusiasm of the students and teachers at the initial fair, many parents volunteered to offer their time to help in institution-building.

In contrast to the success of AGVS, a similar endeavor was carried out in Kenya for the pastoral community, with free primary education, school feeding programs, and construction of boarding schools. However, these measures have had little impact on increasing access to education and participation of the pastoral communities (Sifuna, 2005). Although slow, AGVS has had steady growth beginning with 28 students in 2010 growing to a current enrollment of 244 students, 122 boys and 122 girls. The fee waiver for girls in 2012 resulted in doubling the enrolment of girls in AGVS from the 2013-2014 academic year. Currently the management of the school is engaged in research on the best practices of schooling and curriculum development and is trying to implement strategies suitable for the needs of the children from this particular community and rural backgrounds.

Whilst bankruptcy, indebtedness, climatic conditions, illness, and drug and alcohol abuse have been cited as reasons for farmers' suicides, educating the children of the community and training them with diverse skill-sets to enable them to seek other employment in times of crisis, have been overlooked. In this regard, the concept of AGVS comes as a welcome initiative, proposing education as a solution to societal problems. AGVS functions as an NGO with the singular goal of service to society; the school's motto or philosophy, expressed in Sanskrit, *Idam na mama*, or "This isn't mine," means everything we do is for the greater good.

### **Conclusion**

The rural issues in India are very different from issues faced by cities, and therefore things which produce good results in an urban model cannot be replicated in the rural framework. The success of rural India should be gauged keeping in view rural problems and challenges and not taking urban India as a yardstick. The founders of AGVS have diagnosed the problems of farmers and farm labourers in Nagpur and have found a thoughtful solution through a well-defined, rational means of educating their children. They understand the realities of the different needs and requirements of rural education. Their understanding has influenced the viability of AGVS. A revolution in educational practices like that at AGVS will assist in restoring the balance in the emerging Indian economy by aligning the education structure with the importance of agriculture.

There will be four major outcomes if this dream comes true. Firstly, farming will again be considered a prestigious occupation. This will help in building the dignity of the farmers and their profession. Secondly, an educated and skilled workforce will be created. Thirdly, some students will become entrepreneurs and agripreneurs. Fourthly, students of AGVS will become active decision-makers in the rural economy. Though it is too early to predict the ultimate success of this dream, as students are yet in class six, this paper presents the details of the initiative. As stated by Dr. Gandhi (Personal communication):

Even if 1% of our students return to agriculture or allied activities, it will help in nurturing effective agricultural practices and building an optimistic attitude and pride in agriculture as a profession. A generation of agripreneurs will blossom, who will be able to think of solutions in difficult times, get to work with dignity, and secure equal opportunities. He believes AGVS is the powerful beginning of achieving this dream.

After conducting this research, the authors believe that apart from the urban and rural divide, India has diverse concerns in the field of primary education which vary according to the various States, regions, cultures and occupations of the citizens. Hence, it is imperative that the curriculum, pattern and pedagogy are anchored and framed in the respective diversity as mentioned above. This approach will result in reducing the imbalance caused from the foundation years and will assist in the making of a relevant educated youth.

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