

Best Practice I

Title of Practice: Experiential Learning Through Community Outreach

PROJECT AKSHAR

Project AKSHAR is our flagship project under the aegis of NSS which focuses on experiential learning through community outreach programmes. AKSHAR is unique in terms of how it provides a space for consistent engagement and mentoring of underprivileged children from the neighbourhood by our student volunteers. It underlines the institution's commitment to meaningful and consistent social intervention, as well as to its commitment of the need to inculcate a strong sense in our own students of a wholistic, social consciousness and connectedness with underprivileged communities. This programme is completely self-financed.

AKSHAR has been a consistent, long-term endeavour ever since its inception in 2017. It is a collaborative programme, with faculty and a dedicated team of student volunteers. It is unique in that it is an intensive and consistent programme. AKSHAR volunteers work with underprivileged children all year round, taking special care during the examinations. The fact that AKSHAR carried on its work even when the college per se was not open to students over the past half year or so, bears testimony to its commitment.

Objectives of the Practice:

- AKSHAR aims to provide educational and skill building resources, as well as a compassionate, sensitive, and vibrant environment to these children with special focus on experiential learning. Its objectives, are the following:
- To bridge the knowledge gap for under-privileged children, who as first-generation learners, often lag behind in their classes.
- To help students celebrate and participate in national festivals, so they inculcate a sense of being part of a greater, national community and have a space to express their creativity and talents.
- To impart confidence building guidance, psychological counselling, and socialization skills so that they can have a better integration in their institutions and communities.
- To conduct health check-ups for students, so that all health conditions can be identified and treated in time.
- To organize workshops about issues related to physical, mental, and psychological health as well as about gender sensitization, self-defence and self-care.
- ensure that they do not drop out of school due to any kind of duress.

Context:

AKSHAR began as a student initiative outreach programme under the aegis of the National Service Scheme at Maharaja Agrasen College in 2017. It has since grown from strength to strength, diversifying its objectives to empower and aid the target students to the maximum.

The Practice:

The methodology and practice of AKSHAR's initiatives began with establishing a safe and sensitive learning environment for underprivileged children, where they could be tutored and mentored by our student volunteers. The initial engagement began with study materials, stationery, story books and colouring notebooks in the five-day weekly classes. From there the structure and potential evolved to a more inclusive and integrated set up which included celebrations, creative competitions, talent shows, art and craft displays, donation camps and more recently, health camps.

In 2017-18, the highlights of AKSHAR included the celebrations of the Independence Day and later, the 69th Republic Day on 26th January 2018 in the college premises. A total of 80 students enrolled in AKSHAR participated in the events. With blessings and continuous support of the principal, Dr. Sunil Sondhi, Dr. Charu Arya, the faculty coordinator of AKSHAR, the team successfully organised these events and made the students realise the importance of these days. Discussions and interactions were held on the nature of the republic and ideas of patriotism. Several activities like dance, drawing and singing were organised for the young and bright students. The events concluded with refreshments and prize distribution.

2018-19 saw further entrenchment of AKSHAR events for underprivileged students. Apart from the regular classes, these students were part of Independence Day celebrations. This was followed by special cultural events on the occasion of Children's Day, including songs, dances and speeches by students. A donation camp was also organized, where art and craft material made by the children was displayed and sold. General donations were also accepted. The collections were utilized to fund school bags, books, notebooks and stationery items. On December 10, these items were distributed among students. The Republic Day was duly celebrated on 26th January, under the stewardship of our current principal, Dr. Sanjeev Tiwari and Dr. Charu Arya. All of the 80 students enrolled in the project participated in the event, which also showcased their creative talents, and at the end of which they were suitably awarded.

2019-20 began with Independence Day celebrations. The event saw the usual events and fan-fare. The next event in this session was Language Workshop on 17 September 2019. This workshop focused on basic communication skills in Hindi as well as English with tips on improvement of spoken and written language. Social etiquette and interaction were also stressed in the workshop. By the end, all the 58 participants were able to introduce themselves in both English and Hindi.

With the usual tutoring and mentoring, the volunteer team introduced a regimen of regular tests, spoken exercises and quizzes to help students more effectively with their coursework. Then on 28 September 2019, they held a Parent Teacher Meeting with the parents of the children. Parents came in large numbers, and they were happy to be privy to their children's progress in the programme.

On 1 October 2019 a workshop was organized on the basics of personal-hygiene as well as hygienic practices in one's environment. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan was also introduced to the children in the course of the workshop. The workshop was very well received.

2 October 2019 was Gandhi Jayanti, and on this day students were taught about the father of the nation, the Mahatma, and why he is considered so. There was also a drawing competition, poetry recitation and a racing competition to commemorate the event.

A three-day Arts and Crafts Exhibition and Donation Camp was held from 23-25 October 2019. This was a huge success, attracting the attention of not just students but also teachers and staff members. People brought the displayed art and craft work and donated generously towards the cause.

The Republic Day celebrations this year saw the participation of 104 students. This was a record turn out and the event as usual, saw enthusiastic participation from the students in cultural and sporting events.

2020-21 was a difficult year with complete and partial lockdowns. The spirited enthusiasm of the AKSHAR team as well as the children was unhampered, and they resumed the programme as soon as they could in 2021. AKSHAR carried out its programmes even when regular teaching was suspended in college. Covid appropriate protocols were religiously followed during the teaching sessions held for the children. The AKSHAR team realized that the knowledge gap for these children from impoverished backgrounds would be insurmountable, given that most of them could not have access to online learning. In this situation, it was even more important for them to continue to receive educational guidance and tutoring.

A self-defence workshop was organized on the occasion of International Day of the Girl Child on 11 October 2021. The workshop was interactive and participatory and was enthusiastically attended.

AKSHAR organized a Cultural Competition on 31 January 2022. It was attended by 33 students and 15 volunteers. The event had poetry recitation, drawing and painting competitions and some racing competitions. Children really enjoyed being outdoors, even if they had to observe Covid appropriate behaviour.

Evidence of Success:

The growing enrolments in the programme are perhaps the best indicator of its success. It is not just a marker of the interest and enthusiasm of the children, but also a vote of confidence by their parents and guardians. Except for a dip in the immediate post Covid scenario, the enrolments have risen consistently.

The children over the years seem more confident, articulate, well-adjusted and better integrated than they would be typically at the beginning of the programme. AKSHAR significantly makes a positive difference in the grades of the students over a period of time. It is actually about changing lives, one little step, one little event, one little workshop at a time. Every grade salvaged is a future saved, and that is a measure of its own unique success.

AGRASEN BAROJI HELP INITIATIVE (ABHI)

Goal: Maharaja Agrasen College is committed to the cause of providing focused cognitive knowledge and disciplined artistic training to students through multiple and heterogeneous platforms. The institution exemplifies a site where the students with their elevated skills set are able to translate their intellectual, creative, and social skills in pragmatic forms and practices outside of the college environment.

Engaged as the institution is with amplifying the students' cognitive abilities to cement their place professionally on varying global forums; the College simultaneously participates in furthering a social vision whereby the skills and abilities of students can be utilized towards community growth and development.

It is in furtherance towards this vision of community development that the institution has sought to maximise the dynamic qualities of the students not only outside its pedagogical curriculum but also outside the urban, cosmopolitan centre of Delhi. Through the Agrasen Baroji Help Initiative (ABHI), the college has initiated a collective program of knowing village communities and reliving lives lived in these rural areas; and thus engage in participatory forms of democracy.

The Context: This vision of building communities together takes on a concrete form through the practice of, what is categorized as, "Concentric Circles Model of Learning." This model operates through the principle of integration, facilitation and building communities together. At the centre of this triadic model is the principle of integrating educational institutions to communities outside of its working environment. This integration enables the improvement of skills and abilities of not only the students but also those who are outside of the institution's pedagogical milieu. And this broadening of vision allows communities to grow together and to tap into the opportunities of learning and participating in community upliftment and sustenance. This collective vision is premised on the belief that 'true' knowledge can and should spread far and wide. Allowing knowledge to be learnt and shared outside of the four walls of an institution is what the college believes can maximize growth and fashion a shared vision of commitment towards one's society.

It is with this principle in purview that the college works with the Baroji village community. Focusing upon gaining experiential knowledge, this interface offers crucial information in how educational institutions have a socio-cultural and democratic role to play in the wider society.

The Practice: The area of study is Baroji Village situated in the district of Nuh (Mewat), Haryana. A collaborative venture, ABHI initiated by the institution offers tremendous opportunities of shaping and directing abstract, theoretical knowledge to a concrete, practical form via its enunciation in a different space. This interaction provides a means to connect disparate and yet the same world. What ABHI eventually engages in is the dismantling the notion of the 'other' and thence establish a planetary connection of true oneness not underlined by totalitarian principles.

Activities at Baroji: Blurring Boundaries

ABHI is a step forward of actualizing the vision of India – unity in diversity; towards seeking commonalities and yet being appreciative of differences.

Few programs and initiatives undertaken under this project ABHI are as follows:

Swachhta Abhiyan:

Various cleanliness drives were undertaken by a team of fifty students within the precincts of the village. This drive was a real-time manifestation of the Swachhta Abhiyan launched by the Hon'ble Prime Minister. In addition, the importance and significance of hygiene, sanitation was disseminated through numerous sensitization programs.

Awareness Drives through Movie Screening:

To facilitate the village communities to become more attuned towards various governmental regulations and to be aware of their forms of implementation, screening of a movie was undertaken. This movie screening provided a close and detailed insight into the various levels and stages of governmental operations and administrative policies.

Library at Village Temple:

This initiative was driven to popularize knowledge at all sites and for all sections of the village population. So, a small library was established at the village temple premises. This library was established by students through a special donation drive carried out within the college.

Sports Facilities at Baroji:

To allow village folks to participate in an all-round development of their physical and cognitive skills, special activities were embarked upon. These included clearing grounds to play football, providing sporting equipments like goal posts, etc.

Evidence of Success:

ABHI, the Agrasen Baroji Help Initiative has showcased a world full of possibilities. This initiative offered help and guidance to villagers to become more aware and to embark on their own quest of achieving their different goals. However, the sensitization of the villagers towards various dimensions of socio-political life was not a one-way street. Instead, this sharing of knowledge registered interconnectedness and a relational sociality, which articulated the real meaning of humanity. While the students sought to share their knowledge with the village community, what was more enriching and valuable was how this knowledge broke barriers between diverse spaces and multiple classes. ABHI's mutually interactive learning programs produced the true meaning of a communal life. This community disrupts the binaries of thought that has structured our global lives to offer knowledge of oneness and to attune ourselves to the real meaning of being human. ABHI has been an extraordinary process of knowing our urban, sophisticated pretences and thus, overcoming them by knowing other forms and practices of life.

With more than five years of our association with Baroji, knowledge production and dissemination now feels more familiar and yet ever the more exciting. We have connected with the village folks at Baroji, they

find us as familiar beings and this initiative has become a safe haven. It is almost like coming home, being treated to sumptuous home-made delicacies and engaging in fun conversations. As much we are eager to meet them, the villagers also wait for us to return.

And most importantly, we learn to share, communicate and produce knowledge about ourselves and the world we inhabit in a more nuanced manner. Visits to Baroji village have underlined the significance of education in our quotidian lives. These villagers have visited our college as well and the bond has only become stronger. Over the years, Baroji has offered us means to grapple with the exigencies of education in a more deliberate fashion and thus, to address the problems encountered.

Problems Encountered and Resources Required:

There have been few teething problems that one has had to encounter before each visit to Baroji. From logistical problems like the availability of transportation to the problem of financing such initiatives, the other major problem that one found was that of security and safety of volunteers.

ABHI was an initiative to blur the boundaries and dichotomies of our modern world via the means of sharing knowledge and extending resources to villagers outside of the college environment. In these years, Baroji and the institution has formed a close bond based on trust and mutual respect. The institution takes pride in this mode of integration whereby Baroji has become a part of our family.

Nistholi Village: In addition, the college has extended its collaborative hand to the residents of Nistholi village in Loni, Ghaziabad. Here, this visits and discussions with the village sarpanch has enabled a more nuanced understanding of how to build, communicate and share practical knowledge.

AKSHAR



BAROJI (ABHI)



NISTHOLI

