Akanksha Foundation

In today's edition, we turn the spotlight on the Akanksha Foundation, a beacon of hope and change in the field of education. Established in 1991, the Akanksha Foundation has been instrumental in transforming the lives of underprivileged children across India through its innovative educational programs. The foundation's mission is to provide quality education and holistic development to children from low-income communities, ensuring they have the skills and opportunities to thrive. We'll explore how Akanksha's approach to education is breaking barriers and creating a brighter future for countless young minds.

Sehwa India

Also featured in this edition is Sehwa India, a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering marginalized communities through education and skill development. Founded in 2013 by Dipesh Jadhav, Sehwa India has been a catalyst for change, focusing on career guidance, vocational training, and women's empowerment. With a commitment to addressing the educational and vocational needs of underprivileged groups, Sehwa India is making a significant impact on the lives of youth and women. Join us as we delve into the organization's innovative programs and their far-reaching effects on the communities they serve.

AI tools to transform Education for Government school children in India

The primary goal of Project JEET [Joint Efforts for Educational Transformation], led by the Ramakrishna Sarada Samiti NGO, is to enhance the quality of educational resources for both students and teachers. As part of this initiative, we aim to utilize free and open AI tools to support learning in rural schools and among disadvantaged students across India. There are approximately 200 million such students in the country. In this article we shall attempt to understand through a case study whether AI tools actually improved learning experience of students in India.

Khanmigo: Is an AI tool used by Khan Academy mainly in the USA to improve learning experiences. The details of this study conducted in 2023 are given below:
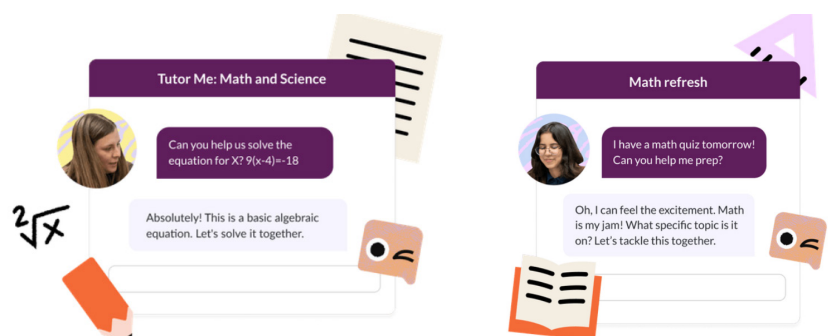
1. Number of Participants: The pilot involved 90 teachers and 800 students. These participants were drawn from various schools to test how the AI could impact classroom teaching and learning.

2. Subjects Covered: The focus was primarily on mathematics, although the tool is versatile and supports other subjects like science and reading comprehension. Khanmigo helps students engage in interactive learning, where the AI acts as a tutor by asking questions, guiding problem-solving, and offering feedback.

3. Project Duration: The pilot took place over the 2022-2023 academic year, allowing enough time for both teachers and students to adapt to the technology and see measurable results.

4. Project Objectives: The main goals were to:

• Enhance student engagement by offering real-time assistance.
• Reduce the time teachers spend on administrative tasks by using AI for automated grading, lesson planning, and generating quizzes.
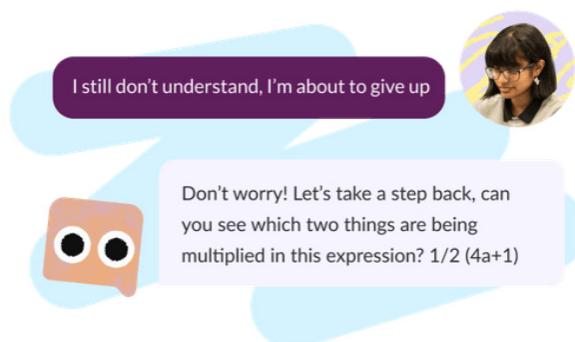• Improve learning outcomes by personalizing learning paths for students.

5. Outcomes:

•Teachers found the AI to be incredibly useful, with about 70% of them reporting that it significantly improved their ability to manage classroom tasks. Additionally, 77% of students gave the AI a rating of 4 out of 5, reflecting their positive experience with the tool.
•The AI system helped make learning more interactive and allowed students to progress at their own pace, addressing individual weaknesses more effectively.

6. Risks and Challenges

•Some risks include over-reliance on AI, which might reduce critical thinking or problem-solving efforts by students if not properly managed.
•There were also concerns about ensuring data privacy for students, as AI systems typically require access to personal and educational data for optimal functioning.
•Another challenge was training teachers to effectively integrate AI into their classrooms without it becoming a distraction or overwhelming their workflow.

This pilot demonstrated the significant potential for AI to transform education, especially in personalized learning and providing administrative support for teachers *(Source: Khan Academy dot org)*.

Learning Beyond Walls: HappyClassrooms' Holistic Approach

Nestled in the scenic hills of Satara, Maharashtra, MSP Foundation's HappyClassrooms, founded by Mr. Mayappan Buddhe, exemplifies holistic education. This monsoon season, the school embraced outdoor learning with exciting field trips, connecting students with nature and enhancing their creativity, problem-solving skills, and love for learning.

"Children learn best through real-world experiences," says Mr. Buddhe. These excursions are vital as they complement classroom learning, promoting physical activity, teamwork, and a deeper appreciation for the environment. For the students, exploring the lush green hills and vibrant local flora and fauna has become an invaluable part of their education.

HappyClassrooms also celebrates cultural festivals like Gokulashtami, instilling values of unity, respect, and gratitude from a young age. These traditions, combined with an inclusive learning environment, deepen students' connection to their heritage and foster a sense of pride and belonging. Through these diverse experiences, the school goes beyond traditional education, nurturing well-rounded individuals who are curious, compassionate, and connected to the world around them.

Akanksha Foundation: Revolutionizing Public Education Through Holistic and Inclusive Models

India's education system, home to over 250 million students, is in dire need of reform. For decades, marginalized communities have struggled to access quality education, and the public education system has remained under-resourced and underperforming. Amidst this landscape, the Akanksha Foundation has emerged as a pioneering force in transforming public education through an innovative approach that places equal emphasis on academic success and social-emotional learning.

Founded in 1991 by Shaheen Mistri, Akanksha began as a small after-school tutoring initiative. Over the years, it has evolved into a powerful organization managing 27 municipal schools in Mumbai and Pune, serving over 10,000 students from low-income communities. By embracing a public-private partnership (PPP) model, Akanksha has redefined what is possible within the public school framework, delivering impressive results despite numerous challenges.

Why Akanksha's PPP Model Works

The PPP model employed by Akanksha is its cornerstone. The schools are operated in collaboration with municipal governments, with the government providing the infrastructure and Akanksha handling the school management, teacher training, and curriculum development. But what sets Akanksha apart from other PPP models?

The key lies in Akanksha's holistic approach. Unlike conventional government schools, where the focus is largely on rote learning, Akanksha integrates emotional well-being, life skills, and academic rigor. This makes a significant difference for students, many of whom face complex challenges outside the classroom, such as financial instability, lack of family support, and unsafe home environments.

According to a 2018 assessment, Akanksha's 10th-grade students consistently outperform their counterparts in government-run schools. In that year, 72% of Akanksha students passed their board exams with distinction, compared to just 45% in government schools. But these numbers are just part of the story. Attendance rates at Akanksha schools regularly surpass 85%, a stark contrast to the widespread absenteeism seen in many public schools, where rates often hover around 60%.

These numbers prompt a question: Why hasn't this model been scaled nationwide, especially when the data shows its success? With over 1.1 million government schools in India, replicating the Akanksha model on a large scale could potentially bridge the vast educational divide. Yet, systemic and political challenges make scaling up this model a monumental task.
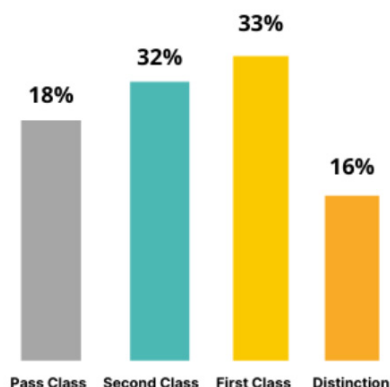
Empowering Teachers, Empowering Students

Teachers are at the heart of Akanksha's success. While the National Education Policy of 2020 emphasizes the need for teacher training, Akanksha had already recognized this gap years earlier. The foundation invests heavily in teacher development, ensuring that educators are equipped not only with subject knowledge but also with the skills to mentor and nurture students from underprivileged backgrounds.
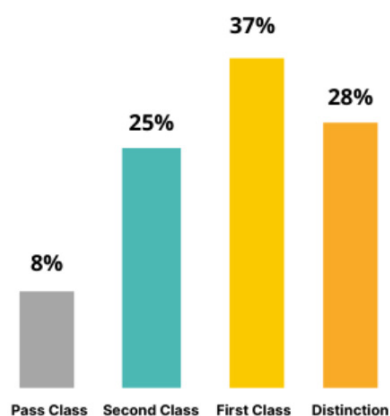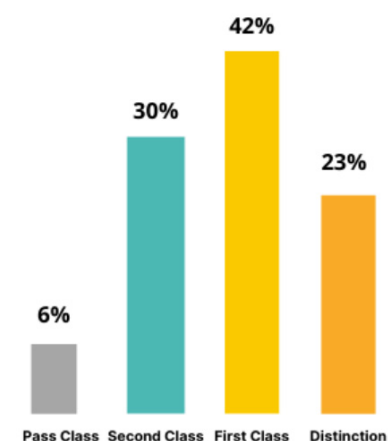
Performance over last 3 years (Grade 10)

18% — Pass Class
32% — Second Class
33% — First Class
16% — Distinction

2018-2019

8% — Pass Class
25% — Second Class
37% — First Class
28% — Distinction

2019-2020

6% — Pass Class
30% — Second Class
42% — First Class
23% — Distinction

2020-2021

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In a survey conducted by Akanksha in 2019, teachers reported that they spent almost double the national average on professional development activities such as workshops, mentoring sessions, and peer observation. The impact? Teacher attrition rates at Akanksha schools are significantly lower than in traditional government schools, which often face high turnover due to poor working conditions and lack of support. An Akanksha teacher reflects, "Our students bring their struggles to school. They're dealing with so much more than academics, and we need to understand that if we're going to help them succeed." This statement highlights one of Akanksha's core insights: Educators must go beyond textbooks to create a lasting impact.

But can this level of investment in teachers be scaled across India's vast public education system? Teacher shortages are a major issue in government schools, where the teacher-student ratio can reach as high as 1:50. While Akanksha has succeeded in reducing this ratio, maintaining the same level of teacher quality and support across millions of schools remains an open question.

Parent-Teacher Partnership: Creating a Collaborative Ecosystem

One of the lesser-discussed yet highly effective elements of Akanksha's model is its Parent-Teacher Partnership (PTP). Recognizing that education doesn't begin and end within the school walls, Akanksha has made it a priority to involve parents in their children's learning journey. In most traditional public schools, parents, especially from marginalized communities, tend to be disengaged due to work pressures, lack of education, or simply feeling unwelcome in school environments. Akanksha has turned this around by fostering regular communication between parents and teachers through monthly meetings, home visits, and community events. This collaborative effort not only holds students accountable but also empowers parents to be active participants in their child's education.
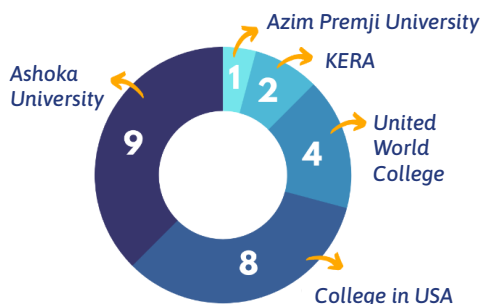
According to a 2020 report, 90% of parents at Akanksha schools attend these monthly meetings, a sharp contrast to the mere 30% engagement rate in government schools. This involvement has led to significant improvements in student behavior, attendance, and academic performance. As one parent shared, "Before, I thought school was just the teacher's job. But now I know that I have a role too, and together we can help our children succeed." This success raises the question: Could a more widespread focus on parent-teacher partnerships improve the national public education system? In an environment where many parents lack formal education themselves, involving them in school life seems like a daunting challenge—but Akanksha's model demonstrates that it is not only possible but also vital for student success.

Leveraging Technology: Online Classes and the Digital Divide

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruptions to education worldwide, and Akanksha was no exception. Yet, the foundation's response has highlighted its adaptability and commitment to keeping students engaged, even in the face of massive challenges. In 2020, when schools across the country shut down, Akanksha quickly pivoted to online learning, leveraging technology to ensure students' education continued.The transition, however, was far from seamless. For students from low-income backgrounds, access to digital devices and stable internet connections was a significant barrier. A survey conducted in mid-2020 revealed that 45% of Akanksha students had either no access to a device or had to share one with multiple family members, making sustained online education difficult. The digital divide is a critical issue that continues to plague the Indian education system, where less than 20% of students in rural areas have access to the internet.

24 Alumni in Prestigious National and International Institutes
2018-2021

Azim Premji University
KERA
Ashoka University
United World College
College in USA

Awards and Recognition

GuideStar India Platinum certification

2019

Great Place to Work® Certification Feb 2019- Jan 2020

2019

GuideStar India Champion Level - Platinum Certification

2018

GuideStar Transparency Award

2016

Rockefeller Center Award — Finalist (Category: Large)

2015

Highest Pledge Raising NGO Standard Chartered Marathon

2009 / 2010

India NGO of the Year Award

2010

To address this, Akanksha implemented several initiatives, including the distribution of smartphones and tablets to students in need and organizing small, socially distanced study groups for those without digital access. Moreover, teachers modified their lesson plans to include asynchronous learning—allowing students to access recorded lessons at their convenience. This flexibility was crucial for students juggling household responsibilities and limited access to devices. Despite these efforts, the limitations of online education remain a pressing concern. A report from 2021 shows that learning outcomes during the pandemic dropped by nearly 25%, as many students struggled to adapt to virtual learning environments. The question arises: Will online learning, with its clear advantages in accessibility and flexibility, become a permanent feature of the education landscape, even for students from marginalized communities?

Akanksha is already exploring the integration of blended learning models, combining in-person instruction with digital tools to enhance the learning experience. The organization's leaders believe that while technology cannot replace the critical role of teachers, it can serve as a powerful supplement, especially in bridging the gap between classroom learning and home environments.

Holistic Learning Beyond Academics

A hallmark of Akanksha's model is its holistic approach to education. Recognizing that children from marginalized communities often face mental and emotional health challenges, Akanksha schools prioritize not just academic learning but also life skills and emotional well-being. One of the standout initiatives is the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program, introduced across all Akanksha schools. SEL helps children learn to manage their emotions, develop empathy, and resolve conflicts—skills that are often overlooked in traditional school settings but are crucial for long-term success. Internal assessments conducted in 2020 showed that 83% of Akanksha students demonstrated improved emotional regulation and better interpersonal skills after participating in SEL programs.

But it's not just emotional intelligence that Akanksha fosters. The foundation has integrated financial literacy, leadership development, and health education into its curriculum. This comprehensive approach ensures that students are not only equipped for academic success but also prepared for life beyond the classroom.

The Road Ahead: Challenges and Opportunities

Despite its success, Akanksha faces several challenges in scaling its model. One of the primary obstacles is funding. While Akanksha receives financial support from individual donors, corporations, and foundations, the cost of running high-quality schools in underserved areas is significant. According to the organization's 2020 financial report, it spends approximately Rs. 50,000 per student annually—an amount far higher than the per-student expenditure in most government schools.

Moreover, while the PPP model has worked well in the cities of Mumbai and Pune, questions remain about whether it can be replicated in rural areas, where access to infrastructure, resources, and trained teachers is even more limited. With India's vast diversity and geographical spread, Akanksha's model must be adapted to different regional contexts if it is to expand effectively.

Nevertheless, Akanksha's story provides a compelling vision for the future of Indian public education. The foundation has shown that, with the right support, students from marginalized communities can thrive. The question now is: How can we bring this level of innovation, empathy, and commitment to every child in India?

Sehwa India (Social Education & Health Welfare Association) : Empowering Lives Through Education and Skill Development

Sehwa India (Social Education & Health Welfare Association), a nonprofit organization founded in 2013 by Dipesh Jadhav in Mumbai, is dedicated to providing education, career guidance, and skill development to underprivileged communities. Born out of Jadhav's personal struggles in accessing education and career guidance, the organization has grown from humble beginnings into a multifaceted NGO with far-reaching impact, particularly among youth and women.

The Origins of Sehwa India

The inception of Sehwa India was driven by Dipesh Jadhav's firsthand experience of the challenges that many young students from middle- and lower-income families face. Lacking access to proper educational resources and career counseling, Jadhav navigated his way through his education in computer hardware and networking largely on his own. It was during his time volunteering with another NGO that he realized there were countless students like him, eager to learn but lacking direction and support. This realization led to the founding of Sehwa India with a mission to address the educational and vocational needs of disadvantaged communities.

Career Guidance and Skill Development

Sehwa India initially focused on career guidance and skill development for young people. The organization's early initiatives included offering courses in computer hardware, electrical work, and other vocational skills designed to help individuals secure stable employment. Recognizing that education is a critical pathway to economic independence, Sehwa India sought to empower its beneficiaries not only with skills but also with the knowledge needed to build long-term careers.

Since its founding, Sehwa India has provided career guidance to over 1,400 students, with a significant focus on written management courses. These programs have led to impressive outcomes, with nearly 70% of participants securing jobs upon completion of the course. The organization also offers nursing courses for young girls and boys, with all training provided free of cost. This holistic approach to career development has transformed the lives of many students, giving them the confidence and skills they need to enter the workforce.

Empowering Women Through Vocational Training

In addition to youth education, Sehwa India places a strong emphasis on women's empowerment. Early on, the organization launched programs focused on teaching women marketable skills, such as beauty parlour management and tailoring. The three-month training courses were well-received, and many of the 90 initial participants went on to open their own beauty parlours or find employment in the textile industry. The success of these programs encouraged Sehwa India to expand its efforts, offering further skill development opportunities to women from marginalized communities.

Sehwa India continues to run women empowerment programs with a target of training 120 women in hospital and nursing skills. These programs not only provide women with valuable professional skills but also help them break free from cycles of poverty, enabling them to achieve financial independence.

Follow and support Sehwa India's work at http://www.sehwaindia.org/

Vipla Foundation
www.viplafoundation.org
Activities : *Education Initiatives, Skill Development Programs, Community Development*

VKRCE Trust
YouTube@MathsMadeSweet
Activites : Education, DIgital Video Library, Training.

Ramakrishna Sarada Samiti
www.rkssngo.org
Activities : Education, Women's Empowerment and Health Camps

National Association for the Blind
www.nabindia.org.in
Activities : Prevention of blindness and low vision, Education, Talking books, Braille press, Vocational training, etc.

Bombay Community Public Trust
www.bcpt.org.in
Activities : Educational scholarships, medical relief, development of some training manuals and films, conducting NGO development activities and projects through NGOs

Shree Samarth Vyayam Mandir
https://ssvmdadar.com/
Activities : Sports Training & Certification and Yoga

MSP Foundation
http://www.msp-edu.org/
Activities : Educating, uplifting and strengthening through schools including the villages of Ambavade and Gursale, in Central Maharashtra.

Muktangan Education Trust
https://muktanganedu.org/
Activities : Seven Mumbai Municipal schools Integrated with a Teacher Education Center, Outreach through Collaborative Learning, Research and Advocacy

The Sehwa Dnyanvardhini Open School Initiative

In 2022, Sehwa India introduced the Sehwa Dnyanvardhini Open School initiative, an innovative concept designed to bring education to the most marginalized children especially children of brick kiln workers. The initiative focuses on children from brick-making industries, rag pickers, tribal communities, and street beggars—groups that traditionally lack access to formal education. Through this initiative, Sehwa India provides basic education, covering everything from the alphabet to mathematics and basic language skills.

In addition to core academic subjects, the Sehwa Dnyanvardhini Open School program also includes a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) component. Students engage in hands-on activities, such as building robots and conducting small science experiments. By incorporating STEM education, Sehwa India ensures that these children are not only literate but also capable of participating in the modern, technology-driven world.

Health and Education for Children in Red-Light Areas

Sehwa India's commitment to improving the lives of children extends to those growing up in red-light areas. Each year, the organization provides educational materials and uniforms to children, incentivizing them to pursue education and stay engaged in learning. Sehwa India's outreach efforts in these communities are vital in building trust with parents and encouraging them to support their children's education. The trust-building process is slow, but the organization's consistent efforts have resulted in a significant shift in the mindset of parents, many of whom now see education as a viable path to a better future for their children.

Sehwa India's Future Vision

Over the past 11 years, Sehwa India has made remarkable strides in improving access to education and skill development for marginalized communities in Mumbai and beyond. The organization's programs have instilled confidence in both students and parents, empowering individuals to take control of their futures through education and vocational training.

Moving forward, Sehwa India aims to continue expanding its reach, particularly in the areas of healthcare training and women's empowerment. The organization's future goals include training more women in hospital and nursing skills, helping them secure employment in the healthcare sector. Sehwa India also plans to deepen its engagement with tribal and rural communities through its open school initiative, ensuring that no child is left behind when it comes to accessing education.

Sehwa India is more than just an NGO—it is a lifeline for thousands of students, women, and families who lack access to basic education and employment opportunities. Through its innovative programs and relentless commitment to social change, Sehwa India is transforming lives, one community at a time.

Can SMART Technologies Transform Rural Education in India?

With the recent launch of SMART Technologies' interactive displays in India, there's a buzz around the potential to revolutionize the country's educational landscape. While these advanced tools are poised to transform classrooms, the question remains: Can they truly benefit rural India, where the challenges are unique and multifaceted? Interactive displays offer a dynamic way of teaching that goes beyond traditional chalk-and-board methods. They allow students to engage with digital content, collaborate on problem-solving tasks, and access a plethora of online resources. For rural schools, this could mean access to quality education that they've long been deprived of due to a lack of trained teachers and educational resources.

India's rural schools often face challenges such as a shortage of qualified teachers, outdated curriculum, and inadequate teaching materials. Interactive displays can help bridge this gap by bringing in standardized, high-quality content. They can also enable teachers to deliver lessons more effectively, catering to different learning paces and styles. However, the road to implementing such technology in rural areas is fraught with obstacles: Infrastructure, Cost Accessibility, Teacher Training.

For students from underprivileged backgrounds, access to quality education through technology could be life-changing. Interactive displays can offer them exposure to a world of knowledge beyond their textbooks, help them build critical thinking skills, and open up new opportunities for future employment. However, without a concerted effort to address the existing gaps, there's a risk that technology could widen the digital divide rather than bridge it. The focus should be on creating a supportive ecosystem that addresses not just technological access, but also the socioeconomic factors that impact education in rural areas.

What Needs to be Done?
To harness the full potential of interactive displays and ensure they benefit rural India, several measures need to be taken:
Government Support: Policies that promote digital education and provide financial support to rural schools for technological adoption.
Community Involvement: Involving local communities in the planning and implementation process to ensure that the technology is tailored to their needs.
Continuous Assessment: Regular monitoring and evaluation to assess the impact of technology on learning outcomes and make necessary adjustments.

SMART Technologies' entry into India is a promising step towards modernizing education. However, for interactive displays to truly transform rural education, a holistic approach is needed—one that goes beyond just technology and addresses the broader challenges faced by rural schools. With the right infrastructure, training, and support, these tools can indeed become catalysts for change, empowering rural students and bringing them closer to a brighter, more connected future.