

# ENABLING PEER LEARNING AND COLLABORATION AMONG TEACHERS

Case Studies from Yadgir (Karnataka), Almora (Uttarakhand) and Kivarli (Rajasthan)

Research Group | Azim Premji Foundation



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*These papers present findings from Azim Premji Foundation's field engagements in trying to improve the quality and equity of school education in India. Our aim is to disseminate our studies to practitioners, academics and policy makers who wish to understand some of the key issues facing school education as observed by educators in the field. The findings of the paper are those of the Research Group and may not reflect the view of the Azim Premji Foundation including Azim Premji University.*

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## Case Studies from Yadgir (Karnataka), Almora (Uttarakhand) and Kivarli (Rajasthan)

### Introduction

Yadgir district, located in North East Karnataka is one of the more disadvantaged districts<sup>1</sup> in the country. Almora district of Uttarakhand, situated in the Kumaon hills of the Himalayas at a height of 1800 metres above sea level is mostly comprised of small towns and villages with little access to basic facilities. Kivarli a small village of around 800 households<sup>2</sup> is located in Abu Road block of Sirohi district of Rajasthan. What do these three locations have in common? In their different ways, these locations present challenging environments for government school teachers to work in. However across these sites one comes upon initiatives where groups of motivated teachers are discovering novel ways to come together and take forward their professional development without the need of administrative orders or extrinsic motivators.

Groups of lady teachers in Yadgir are finding ways to overcome socio-cultural norms of a male-dominated society to be able to pursue their professional development needs. Teachers in Almora brave the challenging weather and the geography to engage ungrudgingly with and pursue professional development in their own personal time. In Kivarli, teachers have carried the entire community with them in setting up a learning resource centre.

These teachers seem to be largely motivated by a sense of professional responsibility; a sense that they need to develop themselves to be able to teach better, so that their students learn better. This belies the popular narrative of 'disinterested' and 'truant' teachers<sup>3</sup> in the government education system. These teachers have been able to translate such motivation into practice, because of efforts that have enabled platforms for their professional development. Such platforms are in turn built on a deep understanding of the lived realities of the teachers – their circumstances and their needs.

For more than a decade and half, the Azim Premji Foundation (Foundation) has been working towards improving the quality of education in the government school system. The primary focus has been on building teacher capacity, as it is the single most important variable that influences educational outcomes for students. In the different locations that the Foundation works in, it provides multiple avenues for teachers to engage with their own professional development, including workshops, courses, seminars, residential camps, teacher forums, on-site support through school visits and so on. All these endeavours are part of a larger integrated strategy that provides teachers with an enhanced choice of modes for professional development. Further, it presents continuous opportunities that teachers can avail of, on their own terms.

Many of these modes include platforms and spaces that facilitate collaboration and peer learning among teachers. This approach recognises teacher isolation as a barrier to teacher development and the need to create opportunities for teachers to meet, share experiences and work collaboratively in an on-going fashion. It recognises the need for teachers to have access to platforms that promote trust, respect and a common sense of purpose. To provide a meaningful experience, any such forum for teacher collaboration would need to have a critical mass of teachers. Partly as a result of its efforts to ensure access to children in the remotest locations, India's government school system is characterised by a large number of small schools and single-teacher schools<sup>4</sup>, making such platforms unsustainable within schools. Hence, the platforms for collaboration and peer learning that the Foundation facilitates are designed to bring together teachers from across schools in a variety of locations.

<sup>1</sup> Arunish Chawla et al. Regional Disparities in India - A Moving Frontier: Economic and Political Weekly, January 3, 2015. Volume 1. No. 1

<sup>2</sup> 2011 Census of India

<sup>3</sup> Research Group, Azim Premji Foundation, - Teacher Absenteeism Study – Field Studies in Education, March 2017

<sup>4</sup> District Information System for Education (DISE) data 2016-17

One such collaborative space that the Foundation has operationalised; outside school, yet proximate to teachers' residences, are the Teacher Learning Centres (TLCs). They are spaces that are equipped with educational resources – like books, journals, newspapers, subject-based resources such as science laboratory apparatus, mathematics kits, and computers with an internet connection – and provide teachers with opportunities to engage formally and informally with their subject as well as a variety of educational issues and perspectives. These opportunities are typically offered at TLCs in the form of informal discussions, workshops, short courses and so on, which the teachers access as per their own need and preference. TLCs are typically established in locations where a significant number of teachers reside.

An example of a platform for peer learning is the Voluntary Teacher Forum (VTF), which provides opportunities for groups of teachers to meet periodically, after school hours or during holidays, to share experiences, discuss challenges and learn from one another. The most common mode of engagement within a VTF is a peer-led discussion on an educational matter of common interest which lasts for around 2-3 hours. Some of the VTFs cater to specific subjects – e.g. forum of Mathematics teachers – whereas others are more generic. They are most commonly anchored within a TLC or LRC (Learning Resource Centre), the nomenclature used in Rajasthan for the same structure.

Previous studies in the *Field Studies in Education* series have brought out insights from the experience of initiating TLCs and VTFs<sup>5</sup>. The studies brought forth the need for persistent and purposive efforts to start and sustain such platforms and the need for them to be spaces that promote a culture of mutual trust and respect while genuinely addressing teachers' professional needs.

The studies also brought out the need for such efforts to be rooted in the contexts of the teachers. While these collaboration and peer learning platforms are operational across several districts and states, there are locations where they have had to be creatively adapted to meet challenging local realities. The efforts at Yadgir, Almora and Kivarli present three such examples, where building upon the principles of collaboration and voluntarism, the Foundation has been able to simultaneously widen and deepen the possibilities for professional development for government school teachers. This compendium offers these three case studies for anyone who is interested in gaining insights which will be useful for operationalising effective teacher professional development processes in a government school system within the context of a complex environment such as India or any other similarly developing country.

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<sup>5</sup> Research Group, Azim Premji Foundation, - Starting and Sustaining Voluntary Teacher Forums; Experience from Tonk, Rajasthan – Field Studies in Education, October 2016; and Research Group, Azim Premji Foundation, - Setting up Teacher Learning Centres; Experiences from some districts of Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Rajasthan – Field Studies in Education, August 2017

## Case Study 1: Lady Teachers' Forum, Yadgir

### 1. Introduction

Across select TLCs established by the Foundation in Yadgir district, groups of 14-15 women teachers meet on Saturday afternoons, after school hours. They participate in a variety of activities and discuss topics of mutual interest; ranging from women's empowerment, child labour, and gender, to other topics more directly related to their practice such as perspectives and pedagogy of Mathematics. Each meeting is typically facilitated by a woman member who may be a fellow teacher or a member of the Foundation. A typical meeting lasts for 2-3 hours. This forum meets periodically, as and when possible. Participating teachers experience these meetings as a liberating space where they have a chance to speak up and be heard on a variety of subjects; where they are acknowledged and their experiences are valued; and, where they get opportunities to showcase their knowledge and their talent. These meetings of the Lady Teachers' Forum (LTF) created by the Foundation are organised exclusively for women teachers in Yadgir, to invite and encourage them to participate in TLC activities and to engage them in their own professional development.

Apart from discussions, the forum organises seminars, workshops and other special activities and events exclusively for women teachers by inviting experts to speak on different subjects. The idea of the LTF has its roots in the challenges faced by the Foundation team - to absorb women teachers in the TLC activities, particularly in Yadgir. Yadgir has a significant population of women teachers. According to available data, 38% of teachers working in Surpur block, Yadgir, spread across 349 schools, are women<sup>6</sup>. However, this was not reflected in the participation of women teachers in either the formal or the informal activities of the Foundation<sup>7</sup> at the TLCs in Yadgir.

An in-house study conducted within the Foundation, in 2013, to understand the participation of women teachers in TLC activities, revealed that on an average only 4 women teachers attended professional development activities organised at TLCs in a week, as compared to an average of 43 for teachers who were men. Given the sizeable population of women teachers, it was very critical for the organisation to involve them in the teacher professional development activities along with men teachers. Thus, the LTF is one of the interventions introduced in Yadgir TLCs to address the challenge of reaching out to women teachers and engaging with them in a sustained manner.

This case study focuses on how these forums came to be established and provides a window into how women teachers feel about the LTF in relation to addressing their own personal and professional challenges in a male dominated society and work environment. A total of 18 teachers who participated in LTF across TLCs – at Shorapur, Kembavi, Narayanpur, Hunasagi, Shahapur, Kakkera and Chamanal – were interviewed, apart from coordinators of these TLCs, who are members of the Foundation.

### 2. The Social Context

Yadgir district, located in North East Karnataka is one of the most backward districts in the state. A study conducted in 2014 for the Planning Commission, focusing on regional inequalities across India, developed a backwardness index which ranks Yadgir, Karnataka as the 49<sup>th</sup> most backward district in India. It has a total population of 11.7 lakhs and the sex ratio in Yadgir is 989 females per 1000 males. The literacy rate is 51.8%, with male literacy at 62.2% and female literacy at 42.3%. This gender gap in literacy of 19.9 % is higher than the state average (14.7%). SC and ST groups comprise 35.7% of the population<sup>8</sup>. With low livelihood opportunities in the district, large numbers of people migrate to Mumbai, Pune, Goa and Bengaluru in search of jobs.

<sup>6</sup>District Information System for Education (DISE) data 2016-17

<sup>7</sup>Formal activities are those that require a formal invitation by the department or an official order permitting the teachers to participate in TLC activities. Informal activities are those that require the teachers to participate in TLC activities voluntarily after school hours.

<sup>8</sup>2011 Census of India

According to many of the teachers interviewed for this study, the low status of women is primarily due to lack of support for girl child education and the practice of child marriage, which is still persistent in the district. The Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights reports that 23%<sup>9</sup> of child marriages in the country take place in Karnataka, with the highest incidence in Yadgir.

The girl child is normally not sent to school. Even if she is enrolled, the dropout rate is very high as compared to boys. Many schools have young married girls on their rolls. Many such girls drop out to look after younger siblings or to work at home. Teachers report that every year in their schools they see 2-3 girl children who, upon completion of 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade, are forced into marriage by their families. They are powerless to stop it. No social media campaigns or awareness programmes are able to stop these child marriages. Once the girl child gets married it is the end of her education; this has a far-reaching adverse impact on her own health as well as that of her family. Lack of education makes them victim to blind faith and superstitious beliefs. This is a vicious circle which perpetuates itself over generations and is currently prevalent in most villages in Yadgir.

A teacher shared her experience of being married at the age of 14: *"My father was a teacher in a primary school and I had many educated people at home who were working in government service. But due to family pressure, I had to marry a close relative at the age of 14. I have personally experienced the pain and consequences of child marriage. Hence, I have been conducting awareness programmes and organising Kishori Mela for adolescent girls to educate people about child marriage. Even then I have not succeeded in stopping or reducing the number of child marriages in the village"*.

Teachers also ascribe lack of economic power to the poor status of women in Yadgir. Even when women earn independently they have little control over what they earn. According to one teacher, *"Women go for both formal and non-formal work to earn money to manage their household responsibilities, but whatever they earn will be given back to the head of the family. They do not have the power to spend the earned money without the permission of their elder family members. Largely, the economic power lies with the husband or father-in-law; this has curbed the voice of women in the society"*. Other teachers echoed this sentiment. They also feel that despite their education and economic independence, even if somewhat limited, they are not considered as equals in such a strongly male dominated society. This creates dissatisfaction and resentment amongst them and makes them fearful and apprehensive of the society they live in.

The impact of this feeling of disempowerment spills over into their professional life as well. A teacher shared her frustrations, *"Since I am not allowed to explore the world, my knowledge and power has become limited. I cannot transact the knowledge with my children. Whenever I speak, share experiences and concerns in the workshop or training, they are not recognised or considered. I was neglected and ridiculed by other fellow male participants. Hence I hesitate to speak up. I want to become a Resource Person in my subject or a Cluster Resource Person."*<sup>10</sup> But if you look at the gender parity in the department, very few women teachers have become Cluster Resource Persons. Whenever I expressed the idea, people discouraged me by saying I have got the job and I am getting salary and that is enough for me; that I would not be able to handle its functions, being a Resource Person".

In such a male dominated society women are not encouraged to participate in public activities and programmes, especially after evening hours. Women teachers are not exempt from these unwritten socio-cultural norms in the district.

<sup>9</sup> Report in Indian Express 26<sup>th</sup> Sept 2017. <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/2017/sep/26/karnataka-home-to-23-per-cent-child-marriages-in-country-1662732.html>

<sup>10</sup> Part of the teacher and school support cadre in the school education system at the cluster level



### 3. Barriers to Professional Development

Women teachers, in such an environment, were not comfortable coming to and participating in professional development activities at the TLCs, especially in the presence of men teachers, though every effort was made to establish TLCs in convenient and safe places. They felt that society would frown upon them if they were seen in the company of men teachers. A teacher expressing her hesitation said, *“Whenever I visited TLC, the space was occupied by men teachers. They were involved in playing carom and shuttle badminton; all the space was occupied by them.”* Their own lack of confidence and hesitation colours their perceptions. She went on to explain, *“When I had visited alone, and another time with a fellow teacher, the large group directed some comments at me and they also laughed at me; this was very embarrassing and uncomfortable for me”.*

A teacher expressing her perceived discomfort with the location of the TLC being in a large isolated school ground, which is also used for playing cricket and parking vehicles, remarked *“In the evening hours I feel scared to visit TLC because it is located in an interior place where different people walk around and create nuisance; hence, I would visit only in the day time, after school hours”.*

However, the most important reason, they stated, was that they felt there was little scope for them to participate meaningfully given the predominant presence of men teachers. *“I hesitate to participate in the discussion, because I feel very embarrassed when men teachers laugh at me if I share my thoughts”*, one of the teachers reiterated.

Along with all the above reasons, they also felt that they had to balance between household and professional responsibilities; hence, they could not make time for visiting TLCs or participating in professional development activities there. They explained that generally women have greater family responsibilities than men; along with household work they also get involved in agricultural work and have to look after children as well as go out for their professional engagement as teachers. As a teacher sharing her frustration narrated, *“I had attended a recent residential workshop organised by the Foundation in Dharwad. I could not concentrate on the workshop because I left my children back at home and got frequent calls from family members asking me to return because they could not manage the children and other responsibilities of the family”.*

### 4. Lady Teacher Forum as a Response

Working in the district over a period of time, gradually a deeper and more nuanced understanding of ground realities evolved within the Foundation team. They realised the powerful influence of the socio-cultural context on women teachers and that mere convenience of location and ease of access and use were not enough to bring the women teachers to the TLCs; it was also important to make them feel socio-emotionally safe. The Foundation team also realised the need to empower them, both personally and professionally, to assert their rights and exercise their choices.

This realisation led TLC coordinators and other associated members of the Foundation to come up with the idea of creating separate spaces marked exclusively for women teachers which would be safe and comfortable for them and engage their interest. A variety of strategies, depending upon resource availability across different TLCs, were used to begin engaging with women teachers.

As a first step, members of the Foundation made extensive school visits and collected detailed profiles of women teachers, and simultaneously identified those most interested, sought their support, and invited them for special activities. The teacher profiles helped the team to understand the specific background of the teachers, their areas of interest, their school and the subjects they taught, and allowed the team to create groups with similar interests. To overcome the reluctance of teachers to visit the TLCs, women teachers who attended some of the ongoing VTF sessions

regularly were approached to motivate their colleagues. Volunteers from a Women's Literacy Programme<sup>11</sup> were enlisted to visit schools, interact with teachers and invite them for the various activities.

A series of relatively bigger events like conferences on occasions like Teachers Day were organised to generate excitement among women teachers and to reach out and motivate them to visit the TLCs. Eminent women who could provide inspiration to the audience were invited to officiate at the events. These bigger events helped to identify the interested teachers and follow up with them for the regular events.

Seminars were conducted on the occasion of Women's Day to provide an exclusive space for women teachers. Teachers were encouraged and supported to present papers on topics that resonated with their interests, like equality, opportunities for women in society, gender discrimination and participation of women in government jobs. Teachers who participated in the seminar felt encouraged and validated. One of the teachers described the experience of the seminar as, *"This was the first time in my teaching profession I stood up on the stage and addressed an audience of around 200. This gave me the courage and opened up avenues for future endeavours of this kind"*.

Workshops were conducted for smaller groups of teachers to build their understanding in a variety of areas like gender inequality, women's health and women's rights. For example, a lady activist proficient in gender related issues was invited and a gender workshop was organised for teachers. This covered issues related to gender discrimination, domestic violence, adolescence, gender identities and roles, and so on. In another event a lady police sub-inspector and a lawyer were invited as guests and they spoke about laws protecting women and women's rights.

The teachers expressed regret that despite their education they frequently were cheated due to their ignorance about the law. A teacher explained how just knowing what options she has helps her to feel more empowered, *"We discussed issues which are related to our life, which strengthen us and help us to deal with this society. We had interacted with a lady police officer and realised what we could do if we experience any incidents like harassment, theft, and accidents. We understood how we can protect ourselves, what law speaks about women etc. We explained some of these issues in our schools to colleagues and students. We may not have the power to solve these problems by ourselves but we can better educate the people whom we are working with"*.

The response to these events gave hope to the Foundation team. It paved the way to take forward the idea of LTFs as a platform for collaboration and peer learning. The timing of the LTF sessions threw up certain challenges. Teachers had a strong preference for meeting timings being kept within school hours, which was not possible given the voluntary nature of the activities and the non-involvement of the Education department. They had concerns regarding the evening hours for socio-cultural reasons enumerated earlier. After some trial and error, the typical forum meeting time was scheduled for Saturday afternoons. However, this time was not fixed rigidly and was kept flexible to accommodate specific requests from the teachers. Depending upon the collective convenience of the teachers, sometimes it was fixed for Sundays, holidays or the evening after school hours on weekdays. However, as experience has shown, these timings are also not always convenient for all teachers – sometimes some teachers are unable to get away from their household responsibilities. Some teachers, working in villages away from their homes, travel back to their home-base every Saturday for the weekend and are therefore unavailable on Saturday afternoons. This did disrupt the regularity of the forum meetings despite the best efforts to facilitate everyone's requirements.

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<sup>11</sup> Women's Literacy Programme was an experimental intervention run in Shorapur Taluk of Yadgir during 2014. Young girls who wished to pursue their studies, but had dropped out of school after class 11 or 12 due to financial exigencies, were identified and provided with scholarships on the condition that they use part of their time (evenings and weekends) to engage with the women of their village to help them with basic literacy.





Picture 1: LTF discussions in progress

The initial topics chosen for discussion in LTF sessions resonated with issues and concerns around the lives of women in general and the personal challenges and interests of these women teachers. Some of these topics were art and craft, usefulness of *yoga*, basics of computers, gender discrimination, women's empowerment, health and hygiene, law for women, storytelling and self-motivation. Many of these topics touched teachers emotionally, and provided opportunities for them to socialise in a safe place, voice their opinions and participate and enjoy simple activities together. Participation in these discussions, over time, helped teachers to develop a more positive image of themselves, especially professionally and become comfortable with the idea of the LTF. Subsequently, and gradually, the discussions shifted to content that was more directly related to their professional development, like different perspectives of education, understanding how children learn, consequences of corporal punishment and so on.

Table 1.1 : Examples of LTF session topics

Theme	Topics	
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art and handicrafts</li> <li>• Self-motivation</li> <li>• Usefulness of <i>yoga</i></li> <li>• Basics of computers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My aims of life</li> <li>• Health and hygiene</li> <li>• Cooking</li> </ul>
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender discrimination</li> <li>• Women empowerment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women and law</li> <li>• Folk literature and role of women</li> </ul>
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear around the school system</li> <li>• Teacher and teaching</li> <li>• Child labour and education</li> <li>• What and why education</li> <li>• Exposure visit to a school to understand the Children Resource Centre established there</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body language in classroom teaching</li> <li>• Story-telling</li> <li>• How children learn</li> <li>• Corporal punishment</li> </ul>

Majority of the sessions were jointly facilitated by fellow teachers and members of the Foundation. As with other initiatives of the Foundation, as teachers get more accustomed with time, TLC coordinators encouraged and supported the teachers in facilitating sessions on their own. In some cases, when the topics of discussion are sensitive, teachers are shy and hesitant to initiate a discussion. In such cases, coordinators frame and initiate the process with questions or discussion. They make every effort to create a comfortable and safe environment for teachers and build trust and rapport with them. The processes are collaborative and every effort is made to encourage teachers to take ownership. Usually the topic for the next forum is decided by mutual consent at the

previous meeting. As one of the teachers explained, *“Usually, at the end of every forum meeting all teachers discuss about the topics to be discussed in the next meeting. We choose the topic collaboratively on common agreement. One person takes the responsibility of facilitating the topic.”*

Importantly an attempt is being made to ensure that TLC coordinators are women. It was observed that teachers are hesitant to share their feelings and ideas with men TLC coordinators, though there are a few teachers who profess that they are equally comfortable with both sexes. Finding an adequate number of women personnel who can fulfil such roles have presented a challenge.

### 5. Teachers' Response to the LTF

Since 2014 more than 250 teachers have voluntarily participated in the activities of these forums across 7 TLCs in the district. Each meeting had between 10-15 participants on average.

Table 1.2: Teacher participation in LTFs

TLCs with LTF	Women teachers working within 5 km of TLC location	Total teachers reached through LTF sessions	% reach
Shorapur TLC	149	120	80
Kembavi TLC	96	58	60
Narayanpur TLC	34	31	91
Hunasagi TLC	60	32	53
Shahapur TLC	121	26	21
Kakkera TLC	20	13	65
Chamanal TLC	40	10	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>520</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>55.7</b>

Appreciating the value of LTF sessions a teacher remarked, *“Men are enjoying the privilege of high status in society. No one appreciates women's efforts; they just think negatively about us. Today I am part of the training for master resource persons because the TLC and LTF particularly are motivating me to engage myself in such activities. This kind of support is crucial and required for every lady teacher”.*

In the last three years some changes have been observed in these TLCs. A few teachers, 2 or 3 from every LTF, are now participating in the general (where members of both sexes are present) VTFs. They also participate in weekly evening discussions conducted between 6 pm and 8 pm. They are now open to engaging across TLC activities and have started using TLC materials. One of the coordinators reported that, *“These two women teachers in Shorapur never used to participate in any of the activities in TLC. But from the time they were introduced to the LTF, they have become confident and are now attending Science and English sessions regularly”.*

Perhaps not all of this can be directly ascribed to the LTF. However, one can safely make the claim that for the teachers who have participated regularly in the LTF meetings and other events; it has been an empowering experience. The LTF meetings have made them feel acknowledged. Just participating in the process, irrespective of the content and its value, has been liberating. As a teacher, expressing her feelings of satisfaction, declared, *“The first reason for me is, we have some space here to open up ourselves, and enjoy together. Because we do not have such separate platforms in this society, this forum is a platform where we get together and enjoy. The second reason is, I was given*

*responsibility to facilitate some of the sessions which I am interested in. This has motivated me to be a regular part of the forum".* Being accorded respect, the freedom to speak and be heard, and to be treated as professionals, has been a novel, powerful and emotional experience for many teachers. Having a space of their own, where they feel comfortable and not judged, and where they are able to give voice to their thoughts, has enhanced their sense of well-being and their sense of professionalism.

Another teacher described how the LTF gave her an opportunity to realise some of her aspirations, which she may not have been able to do otherwise. She explained enthusiastically, *"I am interested in literature, I write articles and present papers on literature. This LTF and TLC is a platform for me to present my thoughts and papers. TLC has provided a lot of such opportunities for me. I cannot do all these from within the department; but with the TLC I can do all of these. I have presented papers on Children's Literature, Kannada Literature, Vachana Sahitya (form of Kannada prose writing), and Folk literature in many platforms and have worked as a resource person in many Kannada workshops"*.

Apart from the enabling opportunity that the mere process of participation in the LTF provides, the content of the discussions has also been a source of confidence and empowerment. Some discussions have directly informed and educated teachers with respect to their rights and choices. Other discussions on topics related to education have helped them directly in their classrooms. Foundational perspectives on education like 'fear around school system', 'impact of corporal punishment on children's learning', 'teacher and teaching' etc. have deepened their understanding and paved the way for improving their pedagogy. A teacher narrated how a discussion on 'blind beliefs' had a major impact on the way she taught, *"We had a discussion in the forum on 'blind beliefs in the society'. As a Science teacher I had been following some blind beliefs myself; the discussion helped me to come out from these beliefs. Now I regularly conduct science experiments in the school, and use TLC materials to explain the scientific features of phenomena to my children"*.

The LTF has provided opportunities to meet and interact with peers as professionals, share experiences and learn from each other. A teacher described how she got certain teaching ideas directly from colleagues in the LTF, *"We meet other school teachers in the forum and discuss school related and personal issues. Once I shared the issue of improving writing skills among children in my school, and a teacher from the group who had the same challenges shared her experience. I got some suggestions to improve it in my school. It helps me to address other similar challenges which I face in my professional life. I was not interested in teaching art skills to my children but now after attending LTF I feel it is easy and started teaching these skills also to my children"*.

Along with participation in the LTF discussions and activities, teachers share the responsibility of facilitation and organising some of the bigger events. They voluntarily come forward to take on the responsibility and learn to carry out some of the administrative tasks as well. A teacher who participated in organising one such event shared her experience, *"We had celebrated Women's day and all the forum members took the responsibility, from planning to execution. We felt it was our programme and we did it with our best effort. The stage was full of lady teachers, we played all the roles – anchoring, hospitality, arranging logistics, writing speeches, attending to guests, etc. I will never forget this event because we performed our roles with confidence and proved that we can also do such events"*. Clearly the satisfaction of being able to do this enhanced her sense of self-worth.

Despite some challenges like convenient times for all, the distance for some teachers, their continued personal constraints, and so on, the Foundation's experience with the LTF has been heartening. LTFs hold promise as a vehicle for reaching and engaging women teachers who were otherwise outside the fold of the general TPD activities of the Foundation. A profound learning for members of the Foundation from this experience has been that, to be able to reach women teachers and engage them in professional development activities, they have to take account of the lived



realities and readiness of teachers to participate in professional development activities and accordingly cater to their needs.

Before teachers are able and willing to access and make use of professional development opportunities, they need to feel empowered and develop confidence and self-belief. The LTF is such a space that addresses these needs. The non-threatening nature of the space and their emotional engagement with it, satisfies a deep seated need of recognition and acknowledgement, and is instrumental in enhancing their self-confidence and self-esteem and orienting them more positively towards engaging in their own professional development.

## Case Study 2: Pocket VTFs in Almora

### 1. Introduction

Almora district situated in the Kumaon hills of the Himalayas, at a height of 1800 m above sea level, offers some of the most challenging working conditions for teachers. Besides the two major towns, Almora and Ranikhet, the remaining district is comprised of small towns and villages. 97 per cent of the schools are classified as 'rural'; 41 per cent of schools do not have electricity and 35 per cent are not accessible by an all-weather road<sup>12</sup>. Lack of basic facilities like clean drinking water, electricity, limited availability of shops and non-existent healthcare facilities, make living quite challenging in many villages of Almora district. As a result, around 25 per cent of the teachers make the choice to live in and around Almora and Ranikhet.

The remaining teachers are scattered in residential 'pockets' across the district. Those teachers whose schools lie beyond the radius of 40 km from these towns, and who do not have a permanent residence in the district, generally choose to stay near their schools to avoid the stress of a daily commute. Teachers who are local to the district choose to live with their families, even if they have to commute lightly more on a daily basis. These two factors have led to the creation of small teacher residential pockets in very small towns or large villages. Such places usually have water, electricity and other basic necessities, but are still remote and travelling to and from on a daily basis can be a fairly arduous task, sometimes even dangerous, because of the hilly terrain. Teachers in such residential pockets have little access to resources and opportunities for their professional development.

While the Foundation has established TLCs to support professional development of teachers in the 'larger' towns with significant teacher population, they don't easily cater to such distributed, small pockets of teacher residences. However, across 4 such remote residential pockets which are more than 40-70 km away from the respective block headquarters one can see small groups of 8-10 teachers get together for 2-3 hours every month, to share experiences, discuss their challenges and learn from each other, led by a resource person from the Foundation. These have come about as a result of the purposive efforts of the Foundation to reach across to these teachers, by encouraging and facilitating the formation of what has come to be called 'Pocket VTFs'<sup>13</sup>.

This case study describes the conditions and challenges of teachers in locations where the Pocket VTFs have been started and teachers' experiences of participation in such a forum. It is based on data collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews of 8 participant teachers across 4 such residential pockets and 3 members of the Foundation who have facilitated sessions of such forums. Documents, such as minutes of meetings and reports, were also analysed. Sessions of Pocket VTFs held from January 2016 to January 2018 were considered for this study.

### 2. Teacher Challenges in these 'Pockets'

The remoteness and the difficulty of the terrain manifestant a variety of ways. The daily commute time to school for teachers could be in the range of 30 to 150 minutes, one way, depending upon the location of their school. Due to inadequate public transport, the most popular means of transport for these teachers is shared private taxis that provide drop and pickup from school or the closest motorable point.

In addition, almost all the teachers have to trek to their schools. This trek can range from 15 minutes to even 90 minutes in some cases and can frequently endanger the physical safety of the teacher. A teacher describes her daily walk to school, *"I have to cross a river to reach my school and there is no bridge. In the monsoon, it becomes very dangerous"*. Being a hilly and forested area, wild animals, including leopards, may cross their paths. Teachers often share experiences of encounters with

<sup>12</sup> District Information System for Education (DISE) data 2016-17

<sup>13</sup> So named as they are addressing small and distributed residential 'pockets'

leopards and wild pigs during their journey to school; sometimes animals enter school premises in search of water during the dry months. Some of the schools are so remote that teachers advise students not to travel alone. They themselves travel in pairs or with some villagers on these routes.

The winter months – December to February – are particularly harsh with minimum temperatures dropping to single digits in most of these places. Besides contending with the extreme cold, availability of water for drinking and cooking is also a challenge. Many villages do not have piped water supply and even if they do, the supply is very erratic. Teachers first have to arrange water for their homes in the morning and then for the mid-day meal in schools. During and after the monsoon months, the problem is alleviated, but is once again aggravated during the dry months.

Medical facilities are available only in Almora and Ranikhet; for major health issues the closest hospital is in Haldwani (approximately 70 – 80 km away from both Ranikhet and Almora) or Bareilly which is even further away. This problem is further compounded due to extremely poor transport facilities. Buses are limited and taxis, though available, prefer to ply only with a full load. Also, travel to either Almora or Ranikhet and back is not possible within a day and a teacher is forced to take a leave of absence from school in case he or she makes a trip there.

As mentioned earlier, some of the teachers living in these pockets are local and live with their families. However, around half of the teachers live in rented accommodation away from their homes. These teachers feel socially isolated and often complain that they have nothing to look forward to in their spare time other than household work, as the avenues for socialisation and relaxation are non-existent in these places. Many of them teach in single teacher schools and have little or no interaction with colleagues or opportunities for learning and development. The 1600 primary and upper primary schools in the district are served by a total of 2941 teachers<sup>14</sup>. One of the participant teachers expressed her frustration saying, *“I feel completely alienated in my school. Once I was teaching solar system and got confused about some aspects myself; but I had no one to talk to regarding that”*. Social isolation is thus compounded by professional isolation. Another teacher articulated a similar sentiment, *“I feel like I am stuck in a rut. I have no ways to update myself. I do not even know what is going on in the outside world. Even the Internet does not work properly in this place”*.

There are no functioning libraries in the block and cluster resource centres. Even if there are some books in the block resource centre, they are rarely used. The mandatory in-service training for 5-6 days during the summer vacation in May and July is the only avenue for professional development. These too leave a lot to be desired. The selection of teachers for a particular in-service batch can be quite random. Often teachers end up participating in trainings of subjects that they do not even teach in school. Teachers also feel that instead of discussing classroom practices and challenges and topics relevant to the teacher, these trainings focus on theoretical concepts and topics are pre-selected. As a result, teachers have to fend for themselves, learn from their own experiences and find their own solutions to teaching-learning problems in school. Cluster-level monthly meetings, originally intended as a platform for peer learning and collaboration, are irregular and when they happen have tended to focus on administrative tasks and data collection.

### 3. The Evolution of Pocket VTFs

The Foundation started working in Uttarakhand in 2010-11 and is now present in 12 of the 13 districts in the state. Work began in Almora district five years ago in 2013. TLCs were established in Almora and Ranikhet in 2013 and 2014 respectively. After working for two-three years in the district, the Foundation members observed that teachers living in these pockets, far away from the TLCs, were unable to access and utilise the resources or opportunities that the TLC offered. Given the small numbers of teachers in the pockets, even a limited version of a TLC was not a feasible solution. It was out of this need to reach these remotely located teachers that the idea of the 'Pocket VTF' was born.

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<sup>14</sup> District Information System for Education (DISE) data 2016-17



Foundation members engaged teachers living in these residential pockets in informal conversations during in-service teacher trainings, cluster-level monthly meetings and workshops<sup>15</sup> to understand their needs. These teachers expressed their interest to be a part of the Foundation's broader portfolio of voluntary engagements at TLCs, but at the same time shared their challenges in being able to do so. Informed by this understanding, Foundation members proposed the idea of visiting the teachers at their location and spending 2 to 3 hours to discuss some topic related to school and classroom practices. This would take place at a convenient location in the residential pocket and all teachers residing there would participate. Thus, the idea of 'Pocket VTF' was conceptualised along with the teachers. Once a month, Foundation members visit and facilitate a discussion for 2-3 hours. Typically, it takes place on a Sunday, holiday or after school hours; the time is collectively decided by the teachers according to their convenience. The venue could be a school, cluster or block resource centre or a private hall. Foundation members explore various options for the venue, trying to ensure basic facilities like drinking water, clean toilets and electricity supply for audio-visual content, but the most important criteria is ease of accessibility for all the teachers in the pocket.

In a pocket, one or two teachers act as the central point of contact. Members of the Foundation who are located in the respective block get in touch with them and fix a convenient date and time for the meeting. Along with the date, the topic and venue is also selected. The members of the Foundation make sure that a session plan is prepared on the agreed topic, reviewed for quality and necessary materials (videos, readings, teaching-learning material etc.) have been arranged. After incorporating the feedback from team members, the session plan is finalised. Being cognisant of the effort that teachers make to attend these sessions and the importance of ensuring that they derive value out of them, one of the members of the Foundation explained the need for careful preparation *“Teachers give their personal time to attend these forums. The planning and execution has to be meticulous, because if teachers do not feel connected to the discussion, they might not attend in future”*.

First started at Jainti in Lamgara block of Almora district in late 2014, currently Pocket VTFs have been initiated in four other pockets in the districts – Kausani and Someshwar (Takula block), Seraghat (Bhaisiyachhana block) and Danya (Dhauladevi block). The table below gives an overview of all Pocket VTFs that are currently operational in the district.

**Table 2.1 : Summary of Pocket VTFs operational**

No.	Location	Distance from Almora	Approximate No. of teachers residing	No. of VTF Session	Period	Average participation	Total Participation (Unique Teachers)
1.	Kausani	52 km	25	2	Aug,17 – Jan, 18	14	17
2.	Someshwar	42 km	40	6	Nov, 16 – Jan, 18	10	21
3.	Seraghat	66 km	20	3	Aug,17 – Jan, 18	6	11
4.	Danya	53 km	30	7	Jan,16 – Jan, 18	8	15
5.	Jainty	75 km	30	6	Jan,16 – Jan, 18	7	18

<sup>15</sup> Part of the portfolio of engagements with teachers, these being largely done through a department ‘order’

There is a clear understanding that this forum is a collaborative platform for peer learning based on the principles of equity and respect for teachers and is purely voluntary in nature. It is a platform that provides a space for their voices; values their experiences and provides an opportunity for them to be able to address their everyday classroom challenges. With this clear understanding, one of the facilitators from the Foundation stated, *“This is not a platform where the facilitator knows all and imparts knowledge to participants, rather it is a platform where all sit together, share their views and we try to reach a common understanding”*. Discussions take place around broader perspectives of education, teaching-learning practices, subject content and classroom challenges. The table below gives representative examples from one location, of the types of discussion which take place in these forums.

**Table 2.2 : Examples of discussions in Pocket VTF sessions**

Date	Venue	Theme	Details	Duration
13/11/16	BRC, <sup>16</sup> Someshwar	Girl's education	Screening of movie 'Kamli' and discussion	2.5 hours
04/12/16	BRC, Someshwar	Importance of local language in teaching-learning	Screening of movie 'Kaafal' and discussion	2.5 hours
26/02/17	BRC, Someshwar	Corporal Punishment	Screening of movie 'Break time'; reading 'Hum toh Parbhakar hai ji' by Hari Shankar Parsai and discussion	3 hours
16/04/17	BRC, Someshwar	Discovery method of learning	Discussion on pedagogy of Environmental Science teaching	2.5 hours
23/07/17	BRC, Someshwar	Discovery method of learning	Screening of video of a 'good school' <sup>17</sup> and discussion	2.5 hours

#### 4. Teachers' Response

The teachers' response has been very encouraging. The mere fact that teachers carve out the time and overcome several hurdles to attend the meetings has been heartening to say the least.

According to the teachers, the nature and content of the discussions have been very helpful to them. They find the discussions relevant and connected to their school and classroom processes. Expressing her satisfaction that this forum has given them the opportunity to sit together and discuss their challenges and ideas, one of the participant teachers said, *“I have only attended six day in-service training this year, that too for the subject which I do not teach. Here I have attended two sessions on developing English language reading in primary children, which I can directly connect to my classroom”*. Another teacher, echoing the same sentiment, said *“We discussed the concept of 'fraction wall'<sup>18</sup> in a VTF session. I did the same with children in my school and they understood the concept better as compared to when I was teaching the same theoretically”*.

Discussions based around perspectives of education have been well appreciated by the teachers. Topics such as education for girls, corporal punishment, caste biases etc. generate very lively and intense discussions. Realising the need and value of these types of discussions, a teacher observed, *“Caste system is still very deep rooted in these remote villages. It is indeed the teacher's responsibility to bring out the demerits of the same in his or her class.”*

<sup>16</sup> Block Resource Centre

<sup>17</sup> 'Good Schools' series of videos produced by the Foundation showcases good practices in different government schools

<sup>18</sup> A 'fraction wall' is a visual representation to help learn fractions set out in the form of a wall. It is used to compare fractions and can also be used to identify fractions that are equivalent.

A few teachers felt that these one day forums are sometimes more beneficial than five or six day trainings. Generally, the long trainings happen around summer holidays and by the time they go back to the classroom, a lot is lost. However, in these forums, they go to the school the very next day and can directly implement the learning, if the topic being discussed is in sync with classroom teaching.

However, no matter how promising the forums, they are not without their challenges. It becomes difficult to find a venue with even basic facilities in some remote villages. Schools and resource centres generally lack facilities like drinking water, electricity etc. Some do not have proper toilets. Members of the Foundation have tried to book private halls – but such options are also very scarce. Due to these limitations, sometimes these forums have been conducted in sub-optimal physical spaces.

Finding an appropriate slot convenient for all 10-15 teachers on Sundays, public holidays or after school hours can be quite difficult. Many of the teachers have personal chores to attend to or visit their hometowns. One of the teachers regretfully explained, *“No matter how much I want to attend these forums, sometimes it becomes impossible due to my personal commitments”*. Members of the Foundation aim for a minimum of seven or eight teachers as a quorum, but have gone ahead with four to six teachers as well, when the occasion demanded.

Due to the remoteness of some locations, access to these for members of the Foundation too presents a challenge. As with teachers, they have to depend on private cabs to visit these places and this sometimes disturbs the continuity of the forum.

The challenges notwithstanding, most importantly, teachers find these forums non-threatening, safe, and a comfortable setting to air their problems and challenges without feeling judged. They are confident that even if the answers are not found, their voice will be heard and respected. Expressing her confidence in the forum a participant teacher shared, *“I like these meeting because I can freely speak and share my challenges. No one will judge me or look down upon me, but will rather suggest possible solutions for the same”*.

The Foundation's experience with these pocket VTFs suggests that there are people in the Public Education system who are willing and determined to change things, provided they have adequate support mechanisms. It gives reason for hope.

With continuous reflection by members of the Foundation, upon the challenges, learning and feedback given by teachers and attempts to further improve the quality and accessibility of the Pocket VTFs, such forums hold the potential of evolving into robust peer learning platforms for teachers. As is evident, it is best when teachers themselves take on increasing responsibility for co-ordinating these platforms with minimum external support.



## Case Study 3: Learning and Resource Centre at Kivarli

### 1. Introduction

The Learning and Resource Centre (LRC)<sup>19</sup> in the village of Kivarli in Sirohi, Rajasthan is a bright cheerful space located in a building in the heart of the village, consisting of a few freshly painted rooms, a library, some scattered tables, chairs and mats and a few computers. In the physical sense it is much like every other LRC the Foundation has established in Rajasthan, except that it is run and managed by the village community.

The centre opens every day at 10 am. On a typical day, groups of youth who are preparing for various career-related examinations open the centre and stay till around 2 pm. They bring their own study resources as well as use various resources – books, magazines – available at the LRC. At around 3:30 pm the children, who would be back from their schools, come in. They engage themselves with whatever interests them – reading, painting, games – using resources available. Teachers come in generally between 5 pm and 7 pm. They use the library, have conversations with each other or engage with youth and children who may be around. On 2 or 3 days a week members of the Foundation visit the TLC in the second half of the day. Most of these days would see organising of specific activities, targeted at teachers, children or the broader community. The centre closes around 9 pm.

The LRC has thus developed as a space for engagement with teachers, and also a community space for children, young people and retired people to study, play and socialise. The group that manages this centre consists primarily of teachers, but also includes representatives of children, the youth of the village and community members retired from government service. It has centred education in the imagination and the daily life of the village community. A teacher posted in a government school in Kivarli shared, *“Setting up a learning resource centre here has been a boon for all of us; children used to generally watch TV, play and roam here and there in the village after school hours - now as soon as they leave school, they beg to go to the library immediately. Along with reading they participate in different activities. The kind of conversation they are having, the children are becoming sensitive to general issues like girls' education and others.”*For teachers of Kivarli, the LRC has provided a platform for both personal and professional interactions. Participation in various voluntary professional development activities has increased their confidence; the centre has provided access to resources that they are then able to use in their classrooms.

The Kivarli LRC is one of the contextual adaptations of the Foundation's approach to establish Learning Centres for teachers and other stakeholders in locations that can be accessed by a significant number of stakeholders, especially teachers. The first LRCs in Rajasthan were started in 2012 in the districts of Tonk and Sirohi, and were located in the block headquarters. Later, as work evolved, such centres began to be located in 'teacher towns' to enable greater accessibility for teachers; teacher towns being locations with a significant number of teacher residences within the block. However, despite this, there were still teachers who continued to be challenged by the distance of their homes from such centres and were unable to make much use of it. Reaching those remotely located teachers became a problem that needed to be immediately addressed.

As a response, smaller satellite centres were conceptualised, located peripheral to the main LRC. Satellite LRCs came to be located in those villages that are at some distance from the block headquarters and have a reasonable number of teacher residents. Due to the remoteness of the location and the difficulty in staffing centres with dedicated personnel in every such village, local teachers and community members are encouraged to assume responsibility for running the centre.

<sup>19</sup> While all TLCs are open to anyone interested, in some locations like Rajasthan, these centres are conceptualised more purposively as 'community' spaces in addition to being a space for teachers and are referred to as Learning and Resource Centres (LRCs)

Kivarli, is the largest village – with 805 households – in Abu Road block of Sirohi district, and is located a mere 12 km from the block headquarters. It has a higher literacy rate compared to other villages in the block, with male literacy at 71.83% and female literacy at 44.27%<sup>20</sup>. After Abu Road, Kivarli has the highest number of government teachers in the block; there are about 90 teachers who are teaching in schools in and across the district. As one sometimes sees in such communities, a virtuous cycle of awareness, encouragement and support has been set in motion at some point that has ensured a continuous stream of teacher aspirants and government school teachers from Kivarli, especially women teachers. In turn, across different communities in this village, there is an awareness of the need for education and the power it has to uplift the individual and the community.

These characteristics probably also made the larger community in Kivarli positively disposed to educational initiatives like setting up of an LRC. Further, several of these teachers were already familiar with the Foundation's work from other engagements in the block.

The journey from conceptualisation to inception of the satellite LRC in Kivarli has been characterised by a deep and sustained involvement of the teachers and community members. This is also being sustained there after, in helping to run it. This case study highlights this experience.

## 2. Journey to Establishment

The journey to establishing the LRC happened over a year, starting in December 2015 when the first attempts to mobilise teachers and others were made, and culminated in November 2016 with the LRC becoming operational.

Despite factors that made Kivarli a suitable location for a satellite LRC, it required considerable groundwork by members of the Foundation to rally the teachers and other stakeholders in the community around the idea of establishing such a centre in the village. To build rapport and create awareness around the kind of educational ideas that the Foundation wanted to work towards, a series of large events like *Bal Mela*<sup>21</sup> were held in a school in the village. In parallel, efforts were made to bring together teachers of the village as a voluntary forum where educational issues would be discussed. Despite obvious enthusiasm, initial efforts didn't yield expected results.

The Foundation persisted and by April 2016 stepped up its efforts by allocating specific responsibility of Kivarli to a few members who were residents of Abu Road block. They realised that significant time and effort was needed to be invested in Kivarli to develop an adequate understanding of local culture, available resources, the geography, the people involved and the dynamics they share.

Teachers and other community members were engaged with individually or in small groups in local spots like teashops, the temple and so on. As one of the team members working in Kivarli narrated, *"We knew a few teachers but were like strangers for other people of the village. In the early days, we used to roam in the village to understand their daily routine and culture. On the first day, we walked around the village, spent some time in the tea shop and came back. We went to school in the day and spent time in the village in the evening. Gradually we got to know some more teachers. When we urged them to meet in the evening, they told us to meet them at the temple. We reached little early and were waiting for the teachers to come. By that time, we introduced ourselves to people coming to the temple and talked to them. Through interactions such as these, more people of Kivarli became known to us and even helped identify others who could help us in this whole process."*

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<sup>20</sup> 2011 Census of India

<sup>21</sup> Teachers work with their students, with support of the members of the Foundation, on projects culminating in an event where they are displayed and discussed

Interactions with the youth, on the other hand, were largely on the cricket field. A member from the Foundation team explained, *“While interacting with teachers, some youth who were preparing for government teachers' exams participated. They also took part in the entire discussion. After that, whenever we visited Kivarli we definitely met them. They used to play cricket in the evening; we would also go there to play. It has been a significant informal space to get acquainted with the youth of the village. Thus, now they are also well known to us.”*

This initial investment in relationships yielded dividends in the form of deep engagement and ownership by teachers and local community members of the processes and activities that followed. As the same team member observed, *“Our 2-3 months of work with teachers and youth and our bond with them has been key in this process. We were quite happy that some of the people in this village were equally concerned about the LRC and worked shoulder to shoulder with us at every step.”*

**Table 3.1 : Key activities and milestones**

Period	Activities and milestones
Dec 2015 to Mar 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rapport building with large events and personal interactions</li> </ul>
Apr 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initial idea for an LRC floated among the stakeholders</li> <li>Team : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Specific responsibility for Kivarli allocated to some members of the Foundation located in Sirohi</li> <li>A core team of teachers formed</li> </ul> </li> <li>Rapport building and mobilisation efforts continue</li> </ul>
May 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vision for LRC shared with community</li> <li>Rapport building and mobilisation efforts continue</li> </ul>
Jun 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vision for LRC detailed out, search for premises begins</li> <li>Rapport building and mobilisation efforts continue</li> </ul>
Jul 2016 to Aug 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Old panchayat building identified as a suitable premises</li> <li>Hectic lobbying by core team and community to make sure the premises was offered for LRC, rather than to a commercial bank</li> <li>Rapport building and mobilisation efforts continue</li> </ul>
Sep 2016 to Oct 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Premises secured for LRC, refurbishment work is done with significant involvement from community members</li> <li>Rapport building and mobilisation efforts continue</li> </ul>
Nov 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resources for LRC arrive</li> <li>LRC opens its doors</li> </ul>

Around the same time, a core team of half a dozen teachers was formed. These were teachers who had participated in various earlier engagements of the Foundation, including some at the LRC at Abu Road. These like-minded teachers, were already aware of the work of the Foundation and understood the concept of the LRC; they helped to multiply the base of stakeholders in the local geography. With successive interactions and discussions, this team expanded to include more teachers and young volunteers. Together they visited schools, met teachers and shared the concept of the LRC. This team also used the informal spaces in the village in the evenings to do advocacy for the proposed LRC and to build a rapport with the majority of stakeholders.



They mobilised stakeholders to participate in the formal meetings to discuss the LRC; as local residents with a deep understanding of village politics they advised members of the Foundation members on who needed to be included in the process to ensure smooth implementation. One of the teachers from the core team explained, *“We told members of the Foundation that they have to reach every single teacher in the schools of that area in the village, and more than one time”*. She also described how she had warned the team against casteism, saying, *“There is some casteism in the village. Before organising any meeting, we should ensure that we have reached out to teachers of all communities in the village and teachers of all communities should participate in meeting.”* As advised the team took care to ensure a good mix of representation from across the village.

It was on the advice and insistence of the core team that the decision was taken to locate the LRC in a government building, the old Panchayat office. The rationale offered by a teacher was that, *“The centre is for all and we are looking for participation and contribution from all sections of society. Therefore, it should be in a building where nobody feels any hesitation to visit. In the given scenario, everybody represents a particular section of society, and usually we find it difficult to mingle with all. Private building might keep few of them away as everybody does not feel comfortable to visit a house which belongs to a particular person and community”*.

Through their lobbying efforts, the core team was able to persuade the Panchayat to overturn a previously made decision for the old Panchayat building to be rented to a commercial bank. A teacher, reflecting on the singular achievement of getting the Panchayat approval and the handing over of the keys of the building to a member of the Foundation team, said, *“Arriving at any decision in the government system is very complex. It was not easy for the Panchayat members to cancel the deal with the bank. But persistent efforts in favour of LRC by different groups from the village made it possible”*.



Picture : Before and after pictures of the LRC premises

The state of the building when it was initially handed over for the LRC might have created dismay. *“The condition of the building was very bad. Liquor bottles were lying here and there in the courtyard; trees had engulfed the entire building. The walls were covered with layers of black moss and the floor was broken. All the households in the neighbourhood used the front space to throw garbage”*, recollected one of the members of the Foundation. But once again the core team stepped in, and along with the members of the Foundation spearheaded the entire clean-up and refurbishment operation. The teachers identified local resources, motivated and persuaded different people to get involved and followed up meticulously to ensure that the compound and building were cleaned and restored. It seemed like the entire village, including passers-by, were galvanised into action.

It was a conscious decision to resource this effort completely from within Kivarli. By the end of November 2016, the LRC was ready. This entire process, from the handing over the keys to cleaning,

painting, arranging for electricity and water connections, took two months and left the village community deeply connected to the future of the LRC.

Once the LRC was ready, a system requiring each individual in the user community to take responsibility by turn was devised to keep the centre open daily. The keys were to be kept in the house of a person living next door to the LRC. It was also made known to all that the centre was accessible anytime and to anybody, and the keys were next door. They just needed to pick up the keys and walk in. The core team of teachers actively advocated the use of the LRC in various forums. As a result, footfalls were regular and continued to increase over time.

### 3. LRC's Contribution to the Community

Every month, since the inception of the LRC, a calendar is prepared and specific activities are conducted for teachers, children and other community members. Along with a schedule of activities, responsibilities are also allocated. Typically, teachers and youth take on the responsibility to work with children and execute the planned activities. Every 2-3 months a common activity is organised in which all the stakeholders participate. Besides the planned activities, children, youth and teachers visit the LRC continually and also hold small meetings to discuss the responsibilities of the LRC. Teachers interact with children and youth coming to the LRC and offer academic support.

For teachers, the primary intended beneficiaries, the LRC has provided a platform for both personal and professional interactions. VTF sessions are held on a monthly basis at the LRC. The subject is selected by the teachers. Regular participation in events like this has boosted teacher confidence. Many teachers have learnt to speak freely and do not hesitate to share their views in a group. As they spend time in the LRC they explore resources that they can use in their classrooms; they are open to experimenting with different approaches. A teacher who is a regular at the LRC, and attends VTF sessions regularly, stated, *"Along with subjects, we always wanted to talk on general issues like female foeticide, girls education. Discussions in VTF sessions helped us to collect different types of materials, their sources and how to initiate and carry the discussion for ward with children on such sensitive and varied issues."*

Children visit the LRC regularly. On an average 15 of them drop by daily and it goes up to 20-25 on the days when there are activities arranged for children. Some of them play indoor games available at the LRC and others read the books. Even some youth and teachers have been observed to join in the activities like film screening and painting with children. In the words of a class 11 student of the government senior secondary school, Kivarli, *"I like to come to the library. When I told my friends about this, they showed interest and visited the LRC with me. They were quite happy because they actually saw the library when there is no such good facility in their village and school. Since there is a collection of books at one place, I can use my time well."* Another student commenting on the freedom and the environment of the LRC, explained, *"Along with books, we also have a chance to see some good movies and documentaries. Most important is the 'fearless' environment; we can read books of our interest and even write on the board."* They feel appreciated when their work is acknowledged. A class 8 student of government Girls upper primary school shared, *"It feels great when the paintings made by us get a space on the display board of the LRC."* The ambience and the fact that everybody is shown respect and has a voice here helps enhance the quality of interaction amongst the students too. As students from both government and private schools participate in joint activities it creates a bond between them and positively influences the attitude of the private-school-going children towards their counterparts in government schools. They have started contributing in processes and activities that concern them and also take care of LRC resources.

For the community it provides a space for socialisation as well as access to different kinds of learning opportunities and resources for individuals. Other community members, hitherto

disconnected from reading and writing, avail the facilities and resources in the LRC. A case in point is women members of the community who visit, albeit infrequently. They read the books which their children bring home. One of the homemakers shared, *“I like to read. We can choose to read books in spare time. My children are grown up now. I am looking for a book on how to talk to and guide them on teenage-related issues.”*

Table 3.2 : Representative examples of events at the LRC

Type of Event	Details
Community interaction	Symposium on World Tobacco Day
VTF session	Discussion on ‘Science and society’
Theatre	Performance of ‘Kabira khade bazaar mein’
VTF session	Food and nutrition
Special event for children	Screening of movie ‘Ice Age 4’
VTF session	Discussion on ‘Language and Politics’
Special event for children	Story telling

Like the students, the older members of the community are sensitive to and appreciative of the space and the nature of interactions. Retired teachers not only make the best of their free time, they further contribute to enhance the quality of engagements with children and teachers. One such retired teacher remarked, *“From the beginning, to setting up and running the centre, the way they (members of the Foundation) deal with people of Kivarli has been very important. Child, youth, teachers, even the elderly in the village, all are impressed with them. They behaved well and provided due respect to all.”*

Despite an energetic start, there are apprehensions about sustaining the enthusiasm. As one of the team members explained, *“Most residents of Kivarli, including teachers, have agriculture land and livestock at home that demands significant time. Usually they work on these after coming from school. Hence it is difficult for them to come frequently to the LRC; but they (teachers and elder community members) visit the LRC in good numbers during our activities and organised events and even support in preparations and mobilisation.”* However with such whole-hearted engagement of the community, and persistent efforts by the members of the Foundation there are reasons to hope that the LRC will continue to develop as a vibrant place of learning for teachers and others in Kivarli.

Notes



[illegible]

[illegible]

