

# STARTING AND SUSTAINING VOLUNTARY TEACHER FORUMS EXPERIENCE FROM TONK, RAJASTHAN

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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 authors and may not reflect the view of the Azim Premji Foundation including Azim Premji University.*

**STARTING AND SUSTAINING VOLUNTARY TEACHER FORUMS:  
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# Starting and Sustaining Voluntary Teacher Forums: Experience From Tonk, Rajasthan

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## Executive Summary

The discourse around continuous teacher professional development in India and its practice has been dominated by the 'teacher training' model. Education research and practice across the world has however rejected such training-driven models in favour of more powerful models of teacher professional development, especially those that support collaboration and peer learning among teachers. Enabling platforms that support such collaboration and peer learning has however been a challenge in the context of the Indian public education system.

Azim Premji Foundation has been working with the government schooling system of various Indian states to improve quality and equity in education. While its work involves multiple dimensions of education, supporting teacher professional development has been at its core. Enabling platforms for collaboration and peer learning, especially ones where teachers participate out of their own volition, has been a key aspect within its long term, multi-modal and integrated approach towards teacher professional development.

Voluntary Teacher Forums are one such platform that the Foundation has enabled in the locations it works in. They bring together teachers who are voluntarily seeking out opportunities to engage with each other on issues that are relevant to their own practice and professional development. This paper explores what it takes to start and sustain Voluntary Teacher Forums in a particular location, based on the experience from Tonk, Rajasthan.

## Key insights

- Platforms such as Voluntary Teacher Forums provide teachers in the government school system with much needed opportunities for collaboration and peer learning
- To sustain, such platforms need to genuinely address teachers' professional needs
- They need to promote a culture of genuine dialogue and mutual trust and contribute to enhancing the professional identity of teachers
- It seems to be of utmost importance that these are not stand-alone platforms, but are part of a holistic approach towards professional development that the teachers find value in
- While they are peer-learning platforms, it requires significant, purposive and persistent efforts from outside – individuals or institutions - to start and sustain them
- Availability of capable people in these locations who can put in such efforts - towards mobilizing teachers and providing relevant academic expertise – seems crucial

## 1. Background

### 1.1 Teacher Professional Development in India

Quality of education in schools is inextricably tied to the quality of teaching and hence to the capacity of teachers. Teacher professional development – preparation (commonly referred to as ‘pre-service’) as well as continuous development (commonly referred to as ‘in-service’) – is now well-acknowledged to be central to the quality of education.<sup>1</sup>

It is also clear that there is a problem with teacher capacity in India. To start with, most of the pre-service teacher education programmes in the country are inadequately designed to build the kind of knowledge, skills and disposition that a professional teacher needs. Secondly, the certification and selection processes for teachers are inadequate and uneven across the country. To compound these issues there are many states in India that appoint different cadres of teachers – such as teachers on short-term contracts and guest teachers - who often do not go through the same qualifying criteria. Finally, there is also the issue of who joins the teaching profession in India, since teaching is not considered amongst the top professions of choice in the country. While this is a complex issue, it is partly to do with the fact that an overall culture of disempowerment and the false notion that teaching is not a challenging job has led to low social status being accorded to the profession.<sup>2</sup>

While these issues need to be tackled, it is clear that if we want to improve education anywhere in the near future, the top priority will be to improve capacity of existing teachers. This puts the onus for improving education on the system of in-service teacher professional development.

Over the last seven decades or so, various strategies have been initiated for in-service teacher professional development in India. This is attested to by various education commission reports over the years.<sup>3</sup> In spite of well-intentioned policies, the in-service professional development opportunities available to teachers in the public education system are somewhat limited. The institutional structures that support teacher professional development are weak due to half-hearted implementation. There is an acute shortage of quality teacher educators at all levels. More fundamental challenges plague the conceptualization of teacher professional development from a lack of recognition of teaching as a profession; as a result we continue to scramble together disparate in-service programmes each year leaving teachers feeling over-trained, and still inadequately prepared to tackle daily challenges in their class-rooms.

More often than not, trainings are rolled out across the state and participant teachers often selected through ad-hoc criteria; there is usually no scope for teachers to pick and choose opportunities according to their individual needs. This often leads to teachers going through irrelevant training programmes year after year resulting in disinterest in and even active avoidance of professional development opportunities. Most of these trainings are also implemented in a cascade approach involving the centralized training of master trainers who then train large groups of teachers in diverse regions within states; such an approach compounds the issue of quality with ‘transmission loss’. In short, the current in-service teacher education system does not meet the requirements of practicing teachers.<sup>4</sup>

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1 This is established in several works in education from across the world. In the Indian context, the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, 2009 (NCFTE, 2009) has affirmed this strongly

2 Report of the High-Powered Commission on Teacher Education Constituted by the Honorable Supreme Court of India, chaired by Justice J.S. Verma 2012 (JVC, 2012) highlights many of the issues mentioned here

3 They include the Secondary Education Commission (1952-53), the Education Commission (1964-66) and the Chattopadhyaya Commission (1983-85). Policy documents like the National Policy on Education (1986) and flagship government programmes like District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) also created institutional structures and processes for continuous teacher professional development

4 Report of the twenty-second Joint Review Mission of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (<http://ssa.nic.in/monitoring/joint-review-mission-ssa-1>) mentions some of these issues

## 1.2 Collaboration and Peer Learning

While there are problems of quality in the current in-service trainings, the bigger issue is the almost complete reliance on trainings itself for teacher professional development. Experiences and research from around the world have rejected such a 'teacher training' model in favour of more effective and multi-modal opportunities for continuous teacher professional development.

A vast body of teacher professional development literature supports the understanding that, collaboration and peer learning platforms, that allow teachers to come together periodically, focus on issues relevant to their work and the classroom, and share, question, reflect and solve problems collectively, have a positive impact on their learning and growth.<sup>5</sup>

Most examples of such platforms from such literature are however located within schools, which allow such collaboration and peer learning to be embedded in the everyday structures of the school and the daily lives of teachers. The Indian public education system – partly as a result of its efforts to ensure access to children in the remotest locations – is characterized by the presence of a large number of single-teacher schools and an even larger number of schools with less than four teachers. Even according to the conservative estimate of District Information System for Education (DISE) data of 2013-14, more than 11% of primary schools and 8% of all schools in the country are single-teacher schools. The average number of teachers in all government schools in the same period is only 4.2 with wide variations along dimensions such as urban-rural. Apart from this, there is the sheer scale of the system, with an average district having around 5000 teachers spread over a vast area, much of it remote and difficult to access.<sup>6</sup>

Such a context makes it difficult to enable such collaboration and peer learning within schools; to provide such opportunities to teachers, platforms that enable such learning must necessarily be located outside schools and yet be accessible to teachers spread across locations. Structures and processes like monthly academic meetings of teachers at the cluster-level have been recommended in policies based on this rationale. While these meetings are envisaged as forums for teachers to reflect and plan together in a decentralized and consultative manner<sup>7</sup>, their implementation has been uneven at best.

## 1.3 Voluntary Teacher Forums

Azim Premji Foundation (Foundation) has been working with the government schooling system of various Indian states for more than 15 years, to improve quality and equity in education. Based on the belief that educational change is a long-term process needing continuous, deep and systemic engagement, the Foundation works through establishing institutional presence in the geographies where it seeks to bring about such change. Today this includes deep, sustained work through "District Institutes" in around 45 districts across different states of India.<sup>8</sup>

In recognition of the centrality of the teacher, and the role teacher capacity plays in any meaningful effort

5 There is a significant body of literature around this. Some of them referred by the authors include:

- Stoll, L., R. Bolam, A. McMahon, M. Wallace, and S. Thomas, 2006, Professional Learning Communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 221–258
- Opfer, V. D., and D. Pedder, 2011. 'Conceptualizing Teacher Professional Learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(3), 376–407
- Thomas R. Guskey And Kwang Suk Yoon, What Works in Professional Development?, *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 90, No. 07, March 2009, pp. 495-500
- Eleonora Villegas-Reimers, Teacher professional development: an international review of the literature, 2003, UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning, [www.unesco.org/iiep](http://www.unesco.org/iiep)
- Anfara, V. A., M.M. Caskey, and J. Carpenter, 2012. 'What research says: Organizational models for teacher learning' *Middle School Journal*, 43(5), 52–62

The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009), recognized this when it noted that in-service teacher education should 'build on the principle of creating "spaces" for sharing of experiences of communities of teachers among themselves, to build stronger shared professional basis of individual experiences and ideas. Giving teachers a space to develop and hear their own voices is of utmost importance' (page 66).

6 Education statistics from District Information System for Education - <http://www.dise.in>

7 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) - Framework for Implementation, 2011; also emphasized in the Restructuring and Reorganization of the Centrally Sponsored Scheme on Teacher Education – Guidelines for Implementation, 2012

8 More details can be found at Azim Premji Foundation's website - <http://www.azimpremjifoundation.org/>

to improve quality and equity in education, building teacher capacity through continuous professional development is at the centre of its efforts.

The Foundation takes a long term, multi-modal and integrated approach towards teacher professional development. This approach is built on the growing recognition of teaching as a dynamic, complex and professional endeavour. It seeks to give agency to the teacher and provide them opportunities to learn through multiple modes, including from each other, in environments that promote trust and a common sense of purpose. Enabling various platforms which facilitate collaboration and peer learning amongst teachers is therefore a central aspect of this approach; Voluntary Teacher Forums (VTFs) are one such platform within this integrated approach of teacher professional development.

VTFs as the name suggests are voluntary peer learning platforms that have been enabled and fostered by the Foundation, for teachers to come together, share experiences, reflect and learn together. They are situated proximate to the teachers' places of residence or work, but outside the schools; teachers meet after school hours and/or on holidays – i.e. entirely outside teachers' official work time - at periodic intervals to discuss issues of academic interest. 'Voluntary' here emphasizes that these forums have no government mandate or official sponsors; there is not even any official appreciation or acknowledgement for participating teachers. There is no compensation, allowance (travel, daily or any other) or even time given off from the course of their duties.

It is usually attended by 15 to 20 teachers, however the numbers may often vary from 6 to 30 for any particular session. A typical VTF session is usually around 2 hours long. The agenda for any session could vary from general issues related to education to very specific subject related discussions. It is intended as a forum where over a period of time, teachers will also engage critically with their own beliefs and attitudes towards broader societal issues like caste, religion, gender, equity etc. Once a VTF has a core teacher group that sustains it, the agenda is set jointly by the teachers and the facilitator(s).

## 2. Scope of the Paper

The first VTFs were initiated by the Foundation in the districts of Tonk and Sirohi in Rajasthan in 2009. Over the years, VTFs have evolved and grown across locations and have become a significant component of the work that the Foundation does with teachers.

The Foundation by now has accumulated some experience and understanding of operationalizing VTFs. This paper attempts to capture and present some aspects of this understanding from the basis of its experience of VTFs in the district of Tonk in Rajasthan.

In 2014, in recognition of the importance of collaboration and peer learning platforms like VTFs for teacher professional development, a research was undertaken by the Foundation's District Institute teams in Tonk and Sirohi with the aim of building a theory around the practice of VTFs. While this original research covered these two locations and the trajectory of VTFs in these locations have been similar, this particular paper is based specifically on data gathered at time from Tonk. Data for the research was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 10 individual teachers and through focus group discussions with groups of teachers across the 6 blocks of Tonk district. Several VTF sessions were observed as well. In addition, in-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted with members of the Foundation who were deeply involved in conceptualizing and setting up the VTFs in Tonk.<sup>9</sup>

The question that this paper seeks to address is:

### **What does it take to start and sustain VTFs in any particular location?**

The embedded questions within this are:

- What are the kinds of efforts that are needed to start and build a sustainable VTF platform in a particular location?

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<sup>9</sup> Some representative voices from these interviews, specifically of teachers, are also presented in this paper

- What do teachers value and perceive as benefits from the VTF that lead them to engage with the platform?

This paper doesn't purport to put forward any general or definitive answers to these questions because of its inherent limitations. First of all, the paper is based on the experience of one district only, namely Tonk. It also uses data that wasn't gathered primarily to answer these specific questions. However it is hoped that some of the insights put forward in this paper can inform practice and perhaps more importantly, encourage further research in this area.

Further, during the course of writing this paper, the authors strongly felt the importance of the fact that VTFs are but one of the modes within the Foundation's integrated approach. Apart from VTFs they include seminars, short and long workshops, courses, collaborative development of teaching-learning material etc. The continuity of contact, connections and reinforcements between and across such a variety of modes seem to enhance effectiveness of each of the modes, including VTFs. However this paper doesn't explore these connections comprehensively.

### 3. Context of Tonk

#### 3.1 District Characteristics

Tonk is located in the north-eastern region of the state of Rajasthan.

Its economy is primarily agriculture-based. As per Census 2011, only 3% of the total area of Tonk is urban. It has seven blocks namely Malpura, Peeplu, Niwai, Tonk, Todaraisingh, Deoli and Uniara. With a population of 1.42 million, it is the 23rd most populous district in Rajasthan. The literacy rate in Tonk is 62.46% as per Census 2011. It also has amongst the highest male-female literacy gaps in the country with male literacy at 78.27% and female literacy at 46.01%.<sup>10</sup>

There are 1554 government elementary schools in Tonk with 7524 teachers and 104,944 students enrolled. 21.3% of primary and 8.2% of all schools in the district are single teacher schools; average number of teacher per school is 2.3 at the primary level and 6.3 overall.<sup>11</sup>

In 2006, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj declared Tonk as one of the country's 250 most backward districts (out of a total of 640). It is one of the twelve districts in Rajasthan currently receiving funds from the Backward Regions Grant Fund Program (BRGF)<sup>12</sup>.

#### 3.2 Foundation in Tonk

The Foundation started to work in Rajasthan in 2005 with its Learning Guarantee Program (LGP) in which the focus was to try and improve classroom transactions through assessment-led reforms. Tonk was one of the districts where the program was implemented. From 2005 to 2011, Foundation's work here included other programs like the second phase of LGP and the Computer Aided Learning Program (CAL), all implemented in close collaboration with the Government. In this period, the Foundation had one person based in each block of Tonk.

By 2011, the Foundation decided to move away from working through specific, time-bound programs. Realizing the importance of continuous, deep and systemic engagement, it started establishing an institutional presence in all geographies where it worked to bring about educational change; the work also became largely focused on supporting teacher professional development. This led to the establishment of several District Institutes, including one in Tonk.

With this shift, the Foundation started building a bigger and stronger academic team in Tonk. It increased the size of the team in each block to two persons, with the rest of the team located at the

10 District Census Report at <http://www.census2011.co.in/district.php>

11 Education statistics from District Information System for Education - <http://www.dise.in>

12 Ministry of Panchayati Raj website - <http://panchayat.nic.in/brgf/>

district headquarters. Significant time of the team based at the district headquarters – at least a week per person per month – was also spent in the blocks in direct engagements with the teachers. Over the years, the team has grown to more than 50 persons in the district with more and more of them located in block towns or even smaller locations where many teachers reside. The team that is spread across the district has a good mix of deep expertise across school subjects and around broader perspectives of education.

Along with the growth in the team, this phase also saw the Foundation establishing its physical presence – in the form of the District Institute office at the district headquarters in Tonk and block activity centres (BACs) in the blocks. BACs, now called Learning and Resource Centre (LRCs) – house educational resources focused on teachers, students, and youth and community members. They provide space for reading, discussions, workshops, working on teaching learning materials etc. They are equipped with libraries, computers, and internet connections. Some of them are located in government premises (mostly schools) whereas others are in private spaces; all of them are in locations that are easily accessible to large groups of teachers.

## 4. Experience of VTFs in Tonk

### 4.1 How the idea came about

The process of setting up a VTF was first initiated in Malpura block in 2009. It was the organization's accumulated experiences and insights over the years that lead to it. It was an idea and a process that evolved out of a deep understanding of teacher needs, their concerns, their challenges and an intimate understanding of the local eco-system – an understanding garnered through working with the teachers and the system, over an extended period of time.

While interacting with teachers at the time of the first phase of LGP (2005 to 2008), it was seen that teachers work in isolation and do not have spaces to collaborate with colleagues to discuss their work and challenges faced in the classroom. It was also clear to members working with the teachers and teacher

**“Teachers felt good having a network for themselves. Once they started coming they felt good and started discussion on various topics. All came voluntarily**

*– Participant Teacher*”

support groups (at district, block and cluster levels) that capacity building was a necessary pre-requisite to bring about a change in teaching-learning methods. As mentioned earlier, the grossly inadequate under-graduate education and pre-service education these teachers had

gone through, made effective in-service support all the more necessary.

The work in the second phase of LGP that started in 2009 required members of the Foundation to participate in and facilitate government in-service training programs across districts and blocks. They also visited schools to provide support in classroom processes as well to understand the impact and relevance of the trainings. These interactions with teachers helped to further the understanding of issues in the existing system and the concerns that were felt by the teacher community.

According to teachers, trainings rarely dealt with real issues of schools and classrooms and therefore had little relevance for them; they were conducted mainly in lecture mode and left little room for teachers to share and express their views and experiences. It was also felt that the modules for in-service training created at the state level failed to cater to the needs of teachers given the wide diversity of contexts and development needs. Additionally, the Rajasthan government closed down Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs), an academic support structure that the Foundation members were working with, in collaboration with the government. This led the Foundation to explore alternative structures to facilitate such continuous capacity building, independent of the government processes.



Given all of these, creating a platform that would enable teachers to reflect and introspect, where teachers could share their experiences of teaching in the classroom and discuss issues of common interest seemed appropriate. As one of the members of the Foundation mentioned, "...it can be seen that every profession has some groups in which they share their experiences and issues among them, but interestingly teachers didn't have such group where they can meet at regular intervals to share current and academic issues".

Looking back at their initial experience of VTFs, teachers also seemed to resonate with the same need. They seemed to value this coming together as a professional community and believe that at the time VTFs provided them with a much needed platform to meet, discuss and learn from each other. They felt that VTF was a platform that could not only facilitate their professional learning, but also provide a sense of professional community.

#### 4.2 Initiating VTFs, obtaining buy-in

The first step in the process of initiation was to share the idea with the government resource persons (members of the government teacher support system) and a few teachers, who, members of the Foundation knew from experience, were likely to be receptive to new ideas. Upon their suggestion, as a first step, some prospective teachers were identified who did good work, were committed and open to seeking development opportunities; in other words intrinsically motivated teachers. Familiarity with the teachers and a prior relationship of trust was very helpful in identifying such an initial pool of teachers.

Foundation members made extensive school visits and discussed the idea with the identified pool of teachers individually. They spent significant time building connections with teachers in schools and used other platforms like the government head teacher meetings and teacher meetings at the Block Resource Centres (BRCs, the teacher support system at the block level) to discuss the idea in detail. Prior to these interactions, a rough concept and operating principles had already been developed through internal discussions within the team:

- It would be a teachers' forum and teachers themselves would decide when to meet, where to meet, what to discuss, and how to take the forum ahead
- Teachers would meet after school hours and there would be no travel, daily or any other kind of allowances given to participants
- Topic of discussion would be decided in consultation with participants. Teachers themselves would try to facilitate the discussion
- It would be a 'democratic' platform where there would be no hierarchy between participants. Participants would respect each other; dignity of each participant was paramount. Everyone would have the same stake over the issues and should be given adequate and equal opportunities to express their views

These points were discussed comprehensively with the prospective participants and other stakeholders. Principally, most teachers who were approached seemed to be in favour of the idea. It was only after

**“The Foundation member started meeting with teachers, some old teachers helped him... we participated in government trainings where Foundation members came and shared its work and VTF. Like this, teachers started to join**

systematic preliminary interactions with significant number of teachers (40 to 50 approximately) and selected functionaries of the block that the first meeting was initiated. It was conducted on 30th July, 2009 in Malpura wherein around 20 teachers and resource persons of the block participated, a little less than half the number contacted.

– Participant Teacher ”

The process of identifying and having preliminary discussions with individual teachers paved the way for developing consensus and support for the concept. For example, some of the teachers in the first meeting argued for organizing the meeting during school hours and getting duty leave for participation. However since prospective teachers had been identified carefully and the idea of VTFs had already been discussed with them extensively, a majority of them supported the concept originally discussed and it was agreed that the forums would be held outside school hours and no duty leave would be sought or provided.

Almost similar procedures were followed in each block, i.e. sharing the idea with familiar teachers and resource persons of the block and reaching out to further teachers through school visits and other platforms. As a result the first meeting in every block was quite well attended though the numbers reduced in the subsequent meetings. Teacher responses also indicate that this was a process that matured over time as relationship and trust began to build. As they interacted with Foundation members in other forums too, there was a positive rub-off effect on the VTFs. Typically a newly started forum would have to be incubated for the first few meetings usually spread over a period of 6 to 7 months. Initial meetings would be devoted to building a shared understanding on the operating principles of VTFs only. Therefore 3 to 4 meetings resulted in creating a group of teachers that agreed to the concept of the forum and had a common set of expectations out of it.

Members of the Foundation involved in the process at that time report that it took patience, persistence and significant investment in mobilization and preparation for the forum before it became an effective structure. The forum at Malpura started to work effectively only by 2010; it took around a year for the members to the Foundation to evolve a common premise and principles for VTFs together with teachers.

Meanwhile as the VTF in Malpura block was evolving, simultaneously teacher forums were also taking place in other blocks. By 2010, it had been initiated in all the six blocks of Tonk (one in each block). By 2011, the situation was very different from what it had been originally. Now, teachers residing in other blocks (where there were no VTFs) were requesting formation of new VTFs. In 2012, the Foundation supported 10 such VTFs out of which 2 were independently started and facilitated by teachers. Malpura and Uniara blocks had two VTFs in each.

### 4.3 What motivated teachers to start coming

From an examination of the teachers' voices, four factors seem to emerge as motivators for teachers to start attending belief that they could be agents of change; desire to be better teachers; and a sense of professional pride.

**“ I attended the first meeting  
at the request of a teacher-friend.  
The informal and friendly atmosphere  
encouraged me to keep coming**

**I was a master trainer in LGP, so I know  
whatever work Foundation does is good**

– Participant Teacher ”

As teachers describe it, discussions and interactions in other forums like workshops and seminars, and in their own schools led to the formation of the VTFs. Being familiarized into the concept by Foundation members predisposed them more positively towards attending. Teachers therefore report that they attended VTF for the first time either based on the credibility

of Foundation members or because of the relationship they share with the members of the Foundation ('resource persons') or out of curiosity, or due to 'word of mouth' by other teacher colleagues.

It was observed that many teachers had a desire to learn and better themselves but the lack of opportunities resulted in dissatisfaction. Therefore, even their initial casual visits were at some level due to a dissatisfaction with the status quo; dissatisfaction with the current state of students' learning,

with the facilities in their schools, with the teaching-learning practices and with the perception of quality of education in government schools. This dissatisfaction led them to engage with the platform to better themselves. They felt the need to deepen their pedagogical skills and advance their content knowledge. They believed that improvement in one's professional skill will lead to improved learning in students

**“ If I improve myself – I can help to stop the downfall of the education system ”**

**I want to feel connected to teaching, increase subject knowledge – as student's learning improves – their motivation also increases**

*– Participant Teacher ”*

which in turn, fuelled their motivation to learn. This motivation to improve also partially came from the need to improve the government educational system and the accompanying belief that teachers played an important role in improving the education system and that a primary requirement for improving the educational system is for teachers to develop themselves. The agency of teachers can be clearly seen from their voice; teachers felt that they can contribute and have a role in improving the quality of education and this feeling acted as a motivator. The awareness of increasing popularity of private education was also a source of concern for teachers. The teachers seemed to be feeling a sense of helplessness because they did not know how to express such concerns. They saw VTF as a forum for discussing such feelings and also a way of addressing some real issues.

**“ These teachers want to do some work, learn new things; they come out of their own wish ”**

**Teachers who want to improve education are part of it. If they have issues they are positive and discuss them to get possible solutions**

*– Participant Teacher ”*

Teachers also seemed to feel a sense of professional pride in belonging to the forum. There was a consensus amongst the teachers that a positive attitude, an interest in learning and improving themselves and concern for children and education are distinguishing characteristics of teachers drawn to the VTFs. They felt that association with the forum gave them an enhanced status with their peers which in turn added to their professional pride.

They were quick to demarcate teachers who did not attend VTFs into two categories - those who did not attend because of various constraints and those who chose not to because they regarded VTF as an intrusion on their time and are not interested in bettering themselves; they were disapproving and somewhat dismissive of the second type of teacher, quick to draw a line of difference between themselves and the others. They felt that unlike themselves, these other teachers were not concerned about quality of education in schools. They also reported that when some of the other teachers heard about VTFs from them and saw the applications and the benefits in the classroom, they were also positively influenced to attend.

#### **4.4 Stabilizing and sustaining VTFs**

While on the one hand VTFs seemed to be addressing a deeply felt and yet unaddressed need, as a concept it was going against the grain as far as teacher professional development efforts was concerned. Apart from the legacy of the training-driven model, VTFs were initiated in a context that teachers find extremely challenging, leading to significantly low motivation towards one's professional development on the part of teachers. However, some important factors seem to have contributed to its evolution and sustenance in Tonk despite such challenges.

#### 4.4.1 Persistence and patience

Despite concerted efforts, the low turnout of teachers in initial meetings and even as far as 2010, a year after initiation, was a huge concern. The number of participants had been less than 10 in most of the meetings in the year of 2010. This also affected the motivation level of Foundation members which also needed to be sustained in order to believe in the potential of VTFs and to be able to nurture them and maintain the quality of the preparation and discussions. There were instances where a resource person might have travelled from Jaipur to Tonk, only to find two teachers attending the VTF. An extremely disheartening experience!

However after many such intermittent experiences and extensive discussions, a shared understanding developed within the members that this was a process that would take time to establish; participation was bound to be low in the initial meetings since this was the first initiative of its kind and possibly a new and unfamiliar concept for teachers and as mentioned above, to some extent culturally alien. Even after the initial phase, the spirit of volunteerism would wax and wane, and with that, also the participation in the VTFs. Members decided that while no blame could be attached to a low turnout but at the same time they would be seeking ways to build more connections with teachers. For example, continued participation in government in-service trainings<sup>13</sup> was used to reach out to large number of teachers and build credibility among them by demonstrating Foundation's approach to teachers and their professional development, quality of its work and expertise of its members.

Additionally it was agreed that the quality of the input provided during VTFs and the accompanying facilitation could not be compromised. It was agreed that while members would continue with efforts to mobilize more teachers, compromises will not be made with the quality of the discussion in any way; they will not let the paucity of participants affect quality of sessions. As one member of the Foundation put it, "... our members would work with the same sincerity and strive to ensure the same quality whether there were 40 teachers or 2 in a session".

**“ Teachers who join VTF should be a part of it for sustained period. Sporadic attendance, discontinuation are not good; these issues may be because the expectations of these teachers from VTF are different. It is possible that the teachers who drop out of VTF may not really understand what is happening in VTF; just coming once or twice does not help... ”**

*– Participant Teacher* ”

Even with redoubled efforts, sustaining the spirit of the early adopters and getting new teachers into the fold proved to be a very challenging task. It was reviewed in every meeting and teachers and members of the Foundation members together planned to contact teachers who were absent from the previous few meetings to know reasons behind their absence and at the same time continue to enrol more like-minded teachers. Members of the Foundation talk about making use of any opportunity – in schools, on the roads, even at homes – they had to meet teachers to talk about VTFs and encourage them to attend sessions.

Despite the schedule of meetings being fixed through a 'democratic' processes, another challenge was the lack of punctuality. Since the meeting time was limited and the group small, the late arrival of even a few participants made it difficult to engage them in discussions. This problem was openly discussed in the group. Opinion within the group on whether the group should wait or not for the latecomers was divided. Finally, it was agreed that one would wait for five to ten minutes for participants to arrive; but at the same time, those who arrived on time had to be engaged in something meaningful. The initial ten minutes began to be used to go through the report of the previous meeting and sometimes to watch

<sup>13</sup> Mostly under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), flagship programme of the government for elementary education

some videos concerning education. It was also decided that participants should be reminded once again on the eve of the meeting or an hour or so before. These steps sorted out this issue to a large extent.

Interestingly, the need for persistence and patience is echoed by teachers as well. One of them articulated the need for teachers to appreciate and understand that the process has to be given time to derive benefits. Clearly they see the benefits as not restricted to learning from the particular day's session only, but extending to other things like being part of a teacher network, developing relationships and a sense of community, which can only happen over time and with some continuity.

The need for sustained efforts with teachers to build and sustain the momentum and excitement around VTFs cannot thus be over-emphasized. Needless to say such persistence wouldn't have been possible if the Foundation didn't have a team based permanently in these locations (and not merely travelling in and out to facilitate sessions).

#### 4.4.2 Appropriate and relevant topics

Early in the VTF journey, members of the Foundation learnt that selection of topics and quality of transactions affected attendance and participation by teachers. Teachers wanted content to focus directly on classroom related matters; things that they could take away and apply directly to the classroom. The earlier meetings therefore focused exclusively on pedagogy, demonstration of innovative teaching practices and classroom related issues. As a result of the direct takeaways, participation in meetings increased from 5 to 6 to 15 to 20 teachers.

Though the original intent had been to also have discussions on social issues and other deep seated beliefs and through that encourage teachers to question their beliefs and dispositions, it was felt that these topics needed to be take up more organically, interwoven into other discussions and also after

**“ Whatever we discussed so far is for primary classes; we are not focusing for higher classes but need to do, going forward**

*– Participant Teacher ”*

a greater degree of trust and comfort had been developed in the group. Therefore the initial meetings focused on classroom practices. Additionally, care was taken not to allow these forums to degenerate into sessions used to vent the teachers' frustration against the

educational bureaucracy or to digress into political discussions. This also required considerable skill and understanding on the part of the facilitator to allow teachers to articulate the challenges and systemic issues they face without such a degeneration.

In the spirit of encouraging ownership by teachers, the practice of jointly deciding the next topic of discussion at the end of every meeting was adopted. This would usually throw up a diverse range of issues from pedagogy to broader issues in education and beyond. However zeroing in on a topic of common interest to all was a challenge. If a topic that was suggested by a teacher three to four times in a row was not addressed or no topic of specific interest to them was discussed then it was felt that teachers may become disenchanted and may even leave the group. Similarly a sort of disconnect could occur between teachers of primary and secondary levels. This concern for relevance is echoed by the teachers. The need for specialized, focused discussion either on subject matter or school levels comes out strongly in their voices. The issue of relevance of the topic to each member continues to date.

A related issue was that there were many topics that came up which required greater academic rigor and time – i.e. they couldn't be discussed in a short time that a typical VTF offered. An idea of organizing a two-three days long residential voluntary teacher forum (RVTF) emerged from this. First such forum was organized in 2010 at Sawai Madhopur, a district near Tonk. 45 teachers who were part of different VTFs across the six blocks took part in the RVTF; 15 were female teachers. The overwhelming response of teachers was encouraging to the members of the Foundation. RVTF was again organized in 2011

at Malpura, Tonk in which 20 teachers participated. While the intent was to organize such residential forums – that bring together teachers from different VTFs - yearly, scheduling challenges made it difficult to sustain.<sup>14</sup>

### 4.4.3 Deep, relevant academic expertise

Along with the importance of relevant and interesting content comes the need for appropriate ‘resource persons’ to facilitate the discussions. While these are ‘peer learning’ platforms, they need to be guided and facilitated appropriately. Teacher expectations from the resource persons are in fact quite high. They expect them not only to be knowledgeable about the topic but also to facilitate in a manner that is inclusive and ensures participation by all.

Resource persons were required to facilitate sessions within limited time and make it interesting and accessible to teachers who came with varied levels of understanding. A tall task indeed! Therefore finding resource persons, with deep expertise in their disciplines as well as an understanding of pedagogy and classroom issues became important. Finding appropriate resource persons was also difficult as the issues raised were quite diverse and specific. It was big challenge for

**“ Availability of resource person for the topics is necessary. We have got adequate materials for Hindi, Mathematics but still awaiting someone in English. Resource person have to listen to participants also. Mostly resource persons speak and we listen...you have to take everyone along with you and listen to all... ”**

– Participant Teacher ”

the resource person to facilitate the discussions around the decided topic meaningfully, ensuring relevance for all participating teachers and keeping them engaged. Initial meetings were facilitated by those Foundation members who had a deep understanding of content and were experienced facilitators.

Given the continuous nature of these forums, it was also imperative that these facilitators be as closely located to the teachers as possible, within the particular block or at least within the district. Over time it was only by exception that sessions were facilitated by someone from outside the district. Foundation’s institutional approach with people located as close to the teachers as possible was clearly important in making such a platform feasible.

The added consideration that teachers were participating in meetings on their personal time exerted a moral pressure on the members of the Foundation to ensure quality and relevance. Also it was observed

**“ Cannot think anyone can facilitate a session with some minimum preparation. Teachers who come for VTF are ‘intellectuals’ and knowledgeable; so resource person should have prepared well to be able to share things with such teachers ”**

– Participant Teacher ”

by the members that poor quality of transactions – when it happened despite best efforts - and low attendance were inextricably linked.

Therefore ensuring quality in content and facilitation became a major imperative. It was agreed that after the topic for the next meeting was finalized, the members of the Foundation would sit together and discuss how to plan its preparation and execution. A detailed module

along with any learning material required to facilitate the session would be made ready by the facilitators a week ahead of the meeting and be shared with the team; relevant feedback would be incorporated

<sup>14</sup> This was revived recently in 2016 when a three-day RVTF was organized in which 45 teachers participated

before the meeting. The members also made it a point to honestly decline requests to facilitate meetings on topics they weren't comfortable with. In some cases, facilitators were also roped in from outside – i.e. outside the group of participant teachers and members of the Foundation. Members of the Foundation talked about the fact that is sessions were interesting and relevant the teachers were willing to stay longer – some sessions extending to three or more hours.

This need for expertise is reflected in the teachers' voices. One of the teachers interviewed, mentioned that, though the Foundation members put in a lot of effort, there were instances where they were not diligent enough and the preparation was hence not up to the mark; the teacher felt that the resource persons needed to be well prepared to be able to face a group of motivated, committed and knowledgeable teachers. Therefore proper preparation, relevant topics and engaging discussion are significant factors contributing towards attendance and participation. While this could also partly be addressed if knowledgeable and experienced teachers could facilitate sessions more, it had its own accompanying set of issues which are addressed in a later section. The onus of bringing in the academic expertise continues to remain with the Foundation.

#### 4.4.4 Sense of equality, collective ownership

The VTFs were founded upon the principles of equality and inclusiveness, jointly initiated and managed by Foundation members and teachers. The central assumption behind the forum was that there is no absolute expert who can provide solutions and address the needs and challenges of the group; instead members need to work together to seek collective solutions. Therefore the facilitators were careful to ensure that they were one of the group and do not govern the agenda. Whatever concerns and challenges

**“ All teachers have a right to present their views in VTF. Though it can be seen in other trainings also, here we feel more confident and open**

*– Participant Teacher ”*

emerged were addressed through discussion and collaborative efforts. This culture and environment that developed in the forums came to be highly valued by the teachers. They speak in one voice about the openness of the forum and the freedom from hierarchy they experience in their interactions, which also fuels their motivation to

be a part of it. They feel heard without being judged; the approachability of the facilitators and their respect for teachers fulfil deeply felt needs like trust, recognition and respect.

The fact that they can participate, speak if they wish to, but yet are under no pressure to perform is something they seem to value and contrast favourably with most of the trainings they have attended. Teachers talked positively about the absence of “protocols” and the atmosphere of “equality and respect”. The fact that their experiences are brought into the discussion, heard, acknowledged and learnt from, contributes greatly to this feeling of empowerment and ownership. The voluntariness of the forum also promotes this feeling; it makes them feel that they are in charge of their own professional development. This sense of ownership is also reflected in the fact that some of them actively try to enroll new teachers into the forum by sharing their experiences, learning and materials as the case may be.

As will be discussed in a later section, transferring responsibility of facilitating sessions – largely – to teachers have had its challenges. However even without that happening, the processes within the VTFs seem to ensure that teachers do feel a sense of ownership and belonging. This perception probably comes from the fact that it is an open and democratic environment facilitating authentic social interaction; teachers have a say in the content that is discussed, when the meeting is held and where the meeting is held. For example, one of the issues with respect to timings was that during the winter months there was a change in school timings from 7 am to 12 noon to 10 am to 4 pm; this made it difficult for teachers to have meetings after school hours. During a discussion in a meeting some teachers proposed to organize

it on Sunday or any school holiday. Therefore in winter months the meeting began to be held generally on holidays. While seemingly small, ability to influence such decisions was hugely motivating to teachers.

Looking back, it is a number of factors that have come together to create a culture at VTFs which is conducive to collaboration and peer learning. Each of these factors may be by itself insignificant, but when they come together it is a potent, empowering combination for teachers individually and collectively. Recognition and acknowledgement of their individual and collective professional identity, the significance of their role in improving the education system, a complete absence of hierarchy demonstrated in all transactions, explicitly valuing their experiences, putting them in the driving seat by encouraging them to make all the decisions with respect to time, venue and topic of discussions, shifting the onus of choice (to attend or not) on to individual teachers, encouraging them to facilitate sessions and ensuring that all transactions within the VTFs whether between teachers or between facilitators and teachers, are governed by the values of respect, equality and cooperation help to build this sense of collective ownership and sense of equality.

#### 4.4.5 Convenient physical spaces

When the forum was first started, Foundation did not have its own premises to operate from. Therefore the question of where to locate the meetings arose. The two options considered were the BRC office or any private place if available, near to where large number of teachers reside. Most meetings were held at the BRC office initially. There were many logistical issues initially including lack of facilities like clean toilets, drinking water, electricity etc. There was also reluctance initially to keep the place open on Sundays. However most such logistical issues that came up were ultimately addressed through interaction with officials - another instance where the relationship of trust with the government functionaries helped in enabling the process.

As the work evolved, as mentioned earlier, the Foundation set up its physical presence with BACs (later renamed LRCs) in these locations. These centres gave a tremendous fillip to the VTFs. It improved accessibility and availability of resource materials; it also afforded greater flexibility in terms of timings of sessions making it more convenient for teachers.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4.4.6 Addressing teacher needs

At the most obvious and tangible level teachers believe that the discussions in VTFs help them directly solve some of the problems they face in the classroom. They give examples of how helpful the discussions of specific subject matter content, especially in 'difficult' areas like Mathematics and English, have been. Some of them talk about how their teaching had become more "organized". One of the direct takeaways has been teaching strategies and ideas that they are able to implement in the classroom and directly benefit students.

Some teachers believe that change in teaching practices in them have led to a greater interest and motivation in children and to lower absenteeism. This in turn has fuelled their motivation as teachers as well as their motivation to attend the forum.

The teachers feel that the change they are consciously making in their pedagogy is also helping them develop a changed perspective of children and the nature of learning. They talk about having begun to use a variety of activities in their pedagogy – focusing on the learning of children including those who do not 'perform'. It has also influenced their behaviour towards students; many teachers mentioned specifically how they no longer rely on fear and punishment and are instead able to use different teaching strategies to engage children. They talk about no longer ignoring the 'weaker' children like they used to do earlier. Overall the experience seems to have had an impact on the way they treat children and think about children.

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<sup>15</sup> Among the many interconnections and reinforcements between the modes of engagements in the Foundation's approach, the ones between voluntary platforms like VTFs and LRCs may be especially interesting to study further



Finally, apart from addressing the obvious need of teachers for enhancement of their knowledge of subject content, and pedagogical knowledge, the VTFs have grown and sustained because teachers seem to have resonated with the forum at a more emotional level. From listening to teacher voices and reading between the lines, one gets the feeling that VTFs address a very basic and key need of teachers – the need for acknowledgement, both personal and professional.

**“As I listen to discussions, I reflect and understand – what I am, what I should I do, what is my responsibility, and how should I work with children. This has helped me get more meaning from my work**

*– Participant Teacher* ”

VTFs, have altered the way in which they view their profession and their professional identity. The sharing amongst teachers builds a sense of community and camaraderie, and bolsters their professional identity. They feel that their attitude towards their profession has changed for the better due to the VTF experience. It seems to validate the importance of their role in educating children and indirectly influencing society. It has helped them to become aware of and connect with their professional responsibilities. Teachers say that they have begun reflecting on their professional responsibilities vis-à-vis what they are actually doing. These reflections have helped them derive more meaning from their work; they probably have been able to connect better with the moral purpose of teaching.

**“What we read here have added a lot to our learning. Initially we were not aware of the Internet and many books; but now among these we are feeling refreshed and benefited**

*– Participant Teacher* ”

Participating in VTFs has had a positive impact on the general and holistic development of teachers in terms of inculcating a reading habit, building an appreciation of the need for teachers to learn and to study, exposure to technology etc. Being exposed to new materials, new insights, alternative points of view and perspectives has broadened

their thinking and made them more open to new ideas and other people’s point of view. Teachers talk about VTFs being “a source of energy”, bringing about “greater positivity” in them. They believe that these small changes are influencing their teaching and in turn benefiting their students.

Experiencing a truly democratic environment where dialogue is encouraged to take place, where people share experiences and get heard and acknowledged with respect has actively modelled the values of equity, respect and dialogue. They acknowledge that they now appreciate a culture of sharing and are less narrow in their thinking.

Most of all, being given a safe, non-judgmental space where they have a voice that is listened to heard and acknowledged, having their experiences acknowledged and valued in a public forum, has changed their self-concept and enhanced their self-esteem.

#### **4.5 Challenges persist**

While VTFs in Tonk have evolved and sustained over time as platforms for collaboration and peer learning among teachers, it is not without its challenges.

##### **4.5.1 Continued need for mobilization**

All VTFs continue to need intense and purposive efforts by members of the Foundation to mobilize teachers. This sometimes raises the question of ‘how voluntary is voluntary’.

Reaching out to large numbers of teachers continue to be important. Part of the reason is that the teacher community in any one geography is dynamic. Teachers continue to get transferred in and out; though continuity is maintained by the presence of a core group of teachers, new teachers need to be introduced to such a platform, and credibility of the forum and the people behind it need to be built. Continued mobilization efforts including participation by members of the Foundation in large-scale in-service government trainings thus remain relevant and important.

The feeling is that volunteerism in a very complete sense is an ideal. However even the fact that the teacher is not attending these forums under any mandate is important as it establishes the message that the teacher needs to assert her agency when it comes to her own professional development choices. Meanwhile different forums are at different stages of maturity and are seen as progressing towards the ideal of volunteerism. However it also seems to be clear that such an effort from an external agency, institution or individuals will be needed over a sustained period to make platforms such as this vibrant and effective.

#### 4.5.2 Diffusing ownership to teachers

In the beginning the Foundation members had to perforce play a key role in organizing and facilitating the meetings. However as the forum evolved, around 2012, it was expected that teachers would take on greater ownership in facilitating meetings as resource persons. However apart from a few exceptional cases, the furthest most teachers got to was documentation of sessions, not its facilitation. This was a challenge across the district.

When this issue was discussed with teachers they conceded that it had been the original intention for them to facilitate these sessions. They were however apprehensive that it could affect the quality of the discussions, which was critical to the functioning of the group; this could also have an adverse impact on teacher participation. Additionally, possibly because of the way the forums have evolved as well as the nature and pervasiveness of the work that the Foundation does, there is an expectation from teachers that Foundation members will continue to enable the process. As one teacher very succinctly put it “Foundation is the father of VTF; cannot imagine this forum without Foundation”.

However from 2012, Foundation members tried to shift the responsibilities in stages to the teacher group. Though, some teachers had already been contributing to formation of VTF since beginning, now they were encouraged to facilitate a session in VTF. Initially they desired to co-facilitate with Foundation members. The next step was to encourage independent facilitation. This was followed with many teachers, but results have varied. Some teachers took on the responsibility but others preferred not to do so. As one of the members of the Foundation put it, while many teachers were experienced as master trainers in in-service trainings, independently facilitating VTF sessions required “greater understanding and significantly more preparation; the bar was perhaps too high at this stage”. Teachers started to facilitate VTFs sometime in 2013 and over time, roughly one third of VTFs have come to be facilitated by the teachers.

#### 4.5.3 Low participation of female teachers

One challenge especially in the beginning was the low participation of female teachers despite frequent interactions and discussions on the initiative with them.

During these discussions it was felt that perhaps they were not comfortable to participate in a group where majority of members are male. This led to a suggestion to form a special forum for female teachers. Opinion among the members of the Foundation was divided on this. Many were not in favour of something that they felt would only be perpetuating the gender inequality one could see in the existing system. Others opined that one should work within such societal realities; that it could indeed be intimidating for teachers from a largely patriarchal milieu to participate meaningfully in a male-dominated forum. Finally a consensus emerged that it would be appropriate to try and create such a

space, even if as an experiment. Special all-women VTFs were initiated in Tonk and Diggi blocks in 2011 as a result. But these didn't succeed in attracting many new participants. After a few meetings it was merged back with the earlier groups.

The reasons for low participation are maybe not too hard to find. As one of the members put it, the women have their hands full with domestic duties especially on holidays. And then there are the more practical problems of commuting to a meeting. While men make short work of the distance on their two wheelers, the women still have to rely on either public transport or men in their family to drop them to the meeting and pick them up later.

Members kept striving to extend participation of female teachers with the help of teachers in the forum. Teachers who were attending the meeting regularly decided to actively share their experience of VTFs with their female colleagues; some of them even supported in bringing them to the sessions and dropping them back home. Such efforts engaged few more female teachers with the forum in 2012. Later these female teachers in turn reached out to their counterparts. In this manner, the number increased year by year and by 2014 female teachers reached 30% of all teachers participating in these VTFs. This was a source of satisfaction for the Foundation members; however this continues to be a challenge for the reasons mentioned above.

## 5. Conclusion

It has been over seven years since the first VTF began in Tonk, Rajasthan. Currently 15 forums are functional in Tonk in which around 1200 government school teachers participate. Significant efforts have gone into the evolution and sustenance of VTFs during these intervening years. Now, there is a sense among teachers as well as members of the Foundation that the VTFs have made significant progress in achieving the original objective of providing teachers a platform for collaboration and peer learning. Several factors have contributed to this, most important being, the very purposive, intense and persistent efforts of the members of the Foundation in mobilizing teachers for the forums and facilitating them. This wouldn't have been possible without an institutional presence in Tonk – i.e. people on the ground right from the beginning, consequently growing in numbers, as well as in academic depth and breadth required for such an effort.

Some objectives have yet to be achieved. For example, as yet the VTFs continue to focus largely on pedagogic issues and classroom related matters; the original intent of facilitating discussions that question fundamental social beliefs and mores of teachers do not happen currently, as much as envisaged. Some groups now seem to now have sufficient maturity to move in such a direction; however this continues to pose a challenge for the participants and facilitators.

Some questions continue to remain, like the ones around the need for continued mobilization efforts, encouraging higher female teacher participation and transferring greater ownership of facilitating sessions to participant teachers. However the primary lesson from this experience is that though it may be culturally alien as a concept, and while there may be a whole host of challenges, both logistical and conceptual, given the right opportunities teachers can and do take charge of their own professional development. Appealing to the intrinsic motivation of teachers, providing an enabling environment, valuing their experiences, giving them choices – all these are significant factors that contribute to the sustenance of VTFs.

This paper has tried to put across some of the insights from Foundation's efforts in Tonk. Such insights have already been applied by the Foundation to similar efforts in other locations. However as mentioned earlier, given the limitations of this particular study and the nature of the issue itself, this paper doesn't purport to present these as general or definitive. Hopefully this will however encourage further studies of platforms like VTFs than can help us reimagine teacher professional development in a context as complex as India's public education system.









