PEOPLE-POWERED PARTNERSHIPS
Leveraging Locally-Driven Solutions for Sustainable Development
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FOREWORD

It is with great pleasure that we present this year’s Fellowship Dossier, “People-Powered Partnerships vol. 2: Leveraging Locally-Driven Solutions for Sustainable Development.” The ideas and models shared in this volume speak to AIF’s commitment to catalyze social and economic change in India and do it in a way that it builds a lasting bridge between the United States and India. Since inception, the AIF Clinton Fellowship has played a crucial role in furthering this commitment. It supports local efforts by creating people-to-people and civil society-to-civil society partnerships towards sustainable development. This volume has been edited by two outstanding Alumni of AIF’s William J. Clinton Fellowship for Service in India 2017-18: Andrew Kerr and Prashant Anand. Both are recipients of the inaugural post-program engagement grant awarded by the Rural India Supporting Trust (RIST) in partnership with AIF, designed to share the impact of the Fellowship program with the larger public. As former AIF Clinton Fellows, they bring a deep understanding of the complexities on the ground and a true appreciation of the power of service for social impact.

This publication features compelling examples of how the AIF Clinton Fellowship has supported innovative, localized solutions in the 2018-19 program year. The five essays that were chosen represent inspiring models narrated by U.S. and Indian Fellows who have served across India on projects ranging from Adivasi educational access to livelihoods inclusion for women with disabilities. We hope that this publication inspires you to join us in our journey to “Serve, Learn, Lead.”

NISHANT PANDEY
Chief Executive Officer
American India Foundation

MATHEW JOSEPH
Country Director
American India Foundation
The Rural India Supporting Trust (RIST) and the American India Foundation (AIF) have been working side by side to eradicate poverty and promote prosperity in India for as long as both entities have existed. RIST is coming up on its 10th-year anniversary and for much of that time, AIF has been a partner that we have relied on to advance our work in the education and health sectors. Why AIF? As a grant-giving organization, it is imperative for RIST to partner with organizations that have the capacity to implement innovative programs with professionalism, transparency, and an attitude that puts the quality of a program above all else. AIF has shown over the years that they can deliver this and that is why RIST decided two years ago to add the William J. Clinton Fellowship for Service in India to our roster of programs we partner with AIF on. I can truly say that this was a great decision! Due to our strong partnership, I have personally had the opportunity to be closely involved with this program. As a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, the AIF Clinton Fellowship program has a special place in my heart. The cultural exchange and deep immersion that the Fellowship allows for brings me back to my days as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Both the Fellow and the organization in which they are placed will benefit from the program in ways that will last a lifetime. A participating organization will gain a motivated and educated person who can bring a specific skill set to them that they may be lacking, and the Fellow will gain the perspective needed to become a more effective and sensitive part of the next generation of change makers. Of course, the hope is for a Fellow to continue to work in a sector related to social service provision of some kind, but the lessons learned from this opportunity are transferrable to just about any vocation they eventually end up in.

Quality! Quality! Quality! I have spent my entire career in the international development sector. The importance of projects which focus on providing a much-needed social service is immense. There is a huge responsibility for AIF to ensure that every project they implement is of high quality. I have seen firsthand what goes into the selection process of both the Host Organizations and the Fellows that participate in the AIF Clinton Fellowship program and am proud to be a part of RIST because it’s allowed me, in turn, to be a part of the Fellowship program. What’s even better is that I have had the opportunity to meet many of the AIF Clinton Fellows that RIST has supported. A group of people that has given me hope for the future! What an amazing crew! The stories you will find within these
pages are an absolute treat. Get ready to begin to understand some of the vast issues that Fellows and Community Development Organizations encounter on a daily basis and the solutions that they come up with. Things that so many of us take for granted are still serious daily hurdles for millions of people across India... and the world.

In 2015, all United Nations Member States, of which both the U.S. and India are a part, came together and agreed upon 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aim to create a peaceful and prosperous world. These SDGs were created under the premise that “ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.” As you will read, the AIF William J. Clinton Fellows are a part of this world-wide effort and it is because of them that these are attainable goals. Efforts like these are a necessity and my hat is off to all AIF William J. Clinton Fellowship for Service in India participants – past, present and future!
INTRODUCTION

Andrew Kerr and Prashant Anand

When looking at India’s development through numbers, it’s easy to feel overwhelmed at first. According to a recent World Bank report, 270 million Indians are poor and 32% of the population lives below the poverty line. About 20% of the population is illiterate and only 61% of Indians have access to electricity. Only 1.1% of India’s GDP is allocated to health spending.

However, this is only one side of the picture. Over the past few decades, India has experienced a number of positive developments.

To give more cohesion and urgency to eradicating poverty and achieving development in a sustainable manner, India joined the UN member states to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. Partnership towards the global goals are at the center of the framework. Since then, India has made important strides towards the ambitious realization of these goals by 2030.

These, by a large part, have been driven by India’s growing civil society. Serving as AIF Clinton Fellows on the ground, we have experienced first-hand the power of grassroots mobilization and the dedication of community members who work tirelessly to lift up others with a humility that is awe-inspiring. We have also witnessed the power of forging partnerships across difference – be it language, caste, ethnicity, heritage, or religion. As AIF Clinton Fellows, we were in the midst of the vibrant ecosystem of local development work in all its complexity – energizing, challenging, frustrating, and transformative. We have worked alongside community leaders dedicated to making a difference together, no matter the barriers they faced. The lessons we learned have changed us forever, and have reaffirmed our dedication to serve. Whether being a U.S. or an Indian Fellow, one thing is clear: without this Fellowship, we would not have had the opportunity

Andrew Kerr and Prashant Anand were AIF Clinton Fellows in 2017-18
to learn about, be part of, and test some of the most ground-breaking innovations, models, and ideas that AIF and its partners supported. Unfortunately, many of these often go unnoticed within a highly competitive and fast-paced media landscape. For this reason, we were excited about the opportunity to curate some of the most compelling stories, models, and solutions from among the current Fellowship cohort, and to select five to showcase in this volume.

To guide our efforts towards achieving the SDGs and in mitigating the challenges we currently face, we recognize the need for heritage-informed, place-based, locally driven partnerships as we continue to share, scale, and innovate projects in the development space of India. The idea of “People-Powered Partnerships” emerged last year as the 2017-18 AIF Clinton Fellows and Senior Fellows held discussions and interventions to situate their contributions in conversation with the SDGs. The inaugural “People-Powered Partnerships” volume sought to emphasize the lessons learned from cross-cultural partnerships about how the local and global connect. Building on the foundation of interconnectedness and cooperation, Fellows developed awareness of the nuances and necessity of contextualizing projects and innovations within specific communities. We, now, seek to continue that conversation with a fresh set of reflections and essays from the 2018-19 AIF Clinton Fellows that guide us with insights into heritage-informed, place-based, locally driven partnerships.

We open with Daniel Soucy’s essay on the efforts of the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative in Delhi. His experiences with heritage-based curricula clearly articulate the central themes and appeal of this publication for partnerships that are powered by the place and people of any development intervention. It radically rethinks the premise of education and asks: what if education diverges from a standardized curriculum and doesn’t just incorporate place-based cultural heritage, but is completely centered on it? The essay highlights careful attention to the multiple paths toward effective learning, interesting teaching, and reinforcing local investment for creating opportunities.

Following a similar approach, the second essay, by Tessa Romanski, explores how the theatrical tradition of Kattaikkuttu in Tamil Nadu can serve an essential role in students’ education, empowerment, and future livelihoods. It extends our understanding about initiatives that amplify local tradition while also creating economic possibilities that thrive in the 21st century.

Essays three and four center on the importance of making projects relevant and impactful to local
All of the essays selected capture AIF’s mission to cultivate cross-cultural partnerships that catalyze social and economic change. They bring to life the experiences of projects and initiatives that value and prioritize place and people. Overall, our objective is to continue expanding awareness of, attention to, and active engagement with the power of heritage-informed, place-based, locally driven partnerships.

resources and needs. They further explore what it means to reframe education outside of the formal, governmental school system and anchor their success in the power of informal, community-based institutions. Nishant Gokhale’s experience of working with Adivasi communities through Bhasha’s Research and Publication Centre in rural Gujarat challenges the notion that access to education is enough to realize India’s Right to Education. He finds that in tandem to being physically accessible, instruction must resonate and linguistically reach students from Adivasi and tribal communities. Drawing key lessons from a local model, his essay argues how libraries might serve a key role to provide the platforms and language materials that students need for success in school. Similarly to this, Ladakh is another site where we find alternative models of education utilized in a remote region with significant success and thought-provoking techniques. Alexandra Barteldt’s essay on the importance of place-based education provides a pioneering example of how people working together with not just other people, but also with the environment, ultimately ensures a critically important link for a high-altitude, harsh yet fragile ecosystem. Discussing a model developed during her service with the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust, Alexandra demonstrates opportunities for community-building and cooperation through biodiversity parks, heritage walks, and play.

Shifting from vulnerable ecosystems to vulnerable communities, we conclude the volume with an essay by Rachel Aier about menstrual health management and mobilization of women with disabilities. Sharing a local model launched by Samerth Charitable Trust in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, Rachel discusses a brave intervention developed in order to displace taboos about women’s health and raise awareness for inclusion. As all of the essays selected capture AIF’s mission to cultivate cross-cultural partnerships that catalyze social and economic change.

We’ve selected these essays to help bring to life the experiences of projects and initiatives that value and prioritize place and people. We hope the stories, the concepts, and the challenges will appeal to glancing readers and seasoned development professionals, alike, and nonetheless inspire critical thinking about stakeholders, resources, and opportunities for change. Overall, our objective is to continue expanding awareness of, attention to, and active engagement with the power of heritage-informed, place-based, locally driven partnerships. We believe the following essays can provide a few models as we move forward and embrace this aspiration.
AIF Fellow Tessa Romanski with a student of Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam, Tamil Nadu.
[Photo credit: Kattaikkuttu Sangam]
LEARNING LOCALLY: The Benefits of Heritage-Focused Curricula

Daniel Soucy

How children relate to learning can play a critical role in how they understand their surrounding society. Receiving instruction only within a classroom setting, students certainly develop the ability to learn basic skills like addition and reading. However, by also utilizing and incorporating a community’s local assets into the curriculum, lessons can also teach students to appreciate learning as well as the importance of caring for community spaces and heritage. I define local assets as any tool for learning that is from the local community. This definition is purposely vague as every community has a wide array of history, heritage, traditions, places, and people from which they can derive opportunities for learning. For this particular context working in Delhi’s Nizamuddin Basti, local assets included tombs, tools for conservation, parks, rare trees, bird and flower specimens, and people from the community.

Why Learn About Heritage?

During my time working with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture’s Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative, I have explored these assets as a means of supporting community teachers and introducing them to alternative methods of education. Using these methods, we offered engaging and relevant community-focused academic lessons. These lessons not only pushed students to think about their communities as important sources of

Daniel Soucy served as AIF Clinton Fellow with the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative – Aga Khan Trust for Culture, New Delhi
knowledge but also engaged with the National Council of Education Research and Training’s (NCERT) math, Hindi, and environmental science learning outcomes. Through these efforts, my work has sought to shift the pedagogy of a South Delhi Municipal Corporation’s (SDMC) primary school classroom. It is now my hope that other schools and educators can replicate this shift and thus create academic opportunities which encourage more students to think about their communities as valuable and worthy of care.

Non-rote methods of learning like heritage engagement are less common in many government schools in India. Often these methods require additional funding for material or staff support. For this reason, despite recommending a shift away from textbooks and toward methods that promote “higher objectives” (as it did in its 2005 framework for the curriculum), the NCERT continues to rely on a textbook-based curriculum. Importantly, these textbooks offer a simple, direct, and cost effective method for guiding teachers from a variety of skill levels and backgrounds. They can also be easily applied across linguistic differences, in a variety of geographic settings, and to students of differing skill sets. These textbooks in particular were also debated and discussed vigorously by a variety of experts. As such, they have proven to be an effective tool for promoting learning outcomes and classroom organization not only in India but across a variety of developing countries. Despite these successes, they are limited in their ability to interest students with relevant examples or promote the NCERT’s higher learning objectives. As one example of these limitations, some of the 4th and 5th standard textbooks ask students to evaluate a time table for a ferry boat in order to practice addition. Most of the students that I work with on a day-to-day basis have never seen a boat before and have no immediate prospects of riding in one. While this activity may help them learn how to find the correct answer to this particular addition problem or introduce them to an object they would otherwise rarely encounter, it was clear that these students did not find the example relevant or particularly interesting. When I observed these textbooks being used in the SDMC school, I found that students were often bored, doodling on the sides of their textbooks or speaking over the teacher’s prompts. In this way, textbooks alone may not provide teachers and students with relevant academic opportunities that engage the school with the broader community. As a result, they may prove both uninteresting as well as ineffective in addressing the NCERT’s higher learning objectives of which “connecting knowledge to life outside of school” is just one.

In contrast to the ferry activity, in achieving these same academic goals, a lesson based on the Nizamuddin – these particular students’ surrounding environment – can utilize field trips to learn in a far more experiential and stimulating manner. It can teach them about the process and method of learning rather than merely how to produce the “correct” answer. In addition to cultivating excitement for learning and knowledge acquisition, these hands-on, asset-focused methods can also instill a sense of appreciation in the students for their local community. While these activities and the possibilities arising from them may be novel for many schools, they are rooted in India’s
alternative education movement and easily adjustable to a variety of academic and community settings.

The Basis for an Alternative Approach: Theoretical Support for Heritage Learning

The potential for these types of stimulating, field-focused lessons is rooted in India’s long-time, growing connection to alternative education methods. One of the founding leaders in alternative education, J.P. Naik, points out that many of the challenges India is facing in educating its citizenry are connected to the fact that India needs to balance quality with equality and quantity. Additionally, throughout Indian history, the country’s leadership has prioritized different goals in education. Some governments have wanted to educate as many children as possible while others wanted to educate fewer, elite groups more intensively. Regardless, Naik believes that India has never achieved an adequate balance between quality, equality, and quantity. Naik’s critique of education in India came in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi and Marjorie Sykes who emphasized non-rote methods as a means of promoting learning and escaping the flaws that Naik discusses. They also focused much of their critique of Indian education on the impact that British colonization played in spreading strict, hierarchical methods of teaching. Students, like subjects, were and continue to be expected to regurgitate information in a manner that pleases the authority figure rather than cultivate questions and experimentation. Learning through work, social engagement with the community, and non-classroom methods could lead to a more enlightened youth with practical skills and abilities to think critically. Therefore, heritage-oriented lessons are not addressing new objectives but rather promoting long-sought principles and skills arguably missing from current municipal textbooks. These resources provide an encouraging alternative for educators who understand that schools are just one of many spaces and written replication one of the many methods through which children can effectively learn.

Based on this critique of the British education and governance system, in 1971 Jiddu Krishnamurti similarly
advocated that education should create interconnection between people and their surroundings. My team at the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative agreed and took action to shift to a pedagogy which embraces this idea. Rather than prioritizing the authority of the teacher and the textbook’s power as the universally correct source of knowledge, heritage-based education continues in Krishnamurti’s and these other scholars’ appeal to diffuse knowledge production. This pedagogy attempts to teach how to develop knowledge in other spaces besides the classroom, using methods that get students to think about how and why to learn rather than just what to learn.14

In 1971 Jiddu Krishnamurti advocated that education should create interconnection between people and their surroundings. My team at the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative agreed and took action to shift to a pedagogy which embraces this idea. This pedagogy attempts to teach how to develop knowledge in other spaces besides the classroom, using methods that get students to think about how and why to learn rather than just what to learn.

This picture features a student from the 5th grade showing her needle work in front of Humayun’s Tomb. Students completed math activities about their art after visiting the tomb. When we first began this project, it was clear that this student in particular was always very excited about “getting the right answer” or being the first one to respond to the teacher’s questions. As educators, we did not view this as a bad thing or something to complain about. She worked extremely hard and made the most of her time in the classroom. However, as she engaged with the curriculum, we noticed that it was challenging or at least new for her to not always have access to a “correct” answer. When completing art-based math projects or interviews with community members for homework, she would often ask if she was doing the work “right.” After a few lessons however, we noticed her becoming more confident in her work, regardless if there was a correct answer or not. She took more creative liberty and as in the case of this particular project, created beautiful projects that helped her learn and grow rather than just be comfortable in a familiar academic environment. She continued to help other students in more rote methods like reading stories and doing math problems but at the same time, she became more thoughtful and independent when completing tasks related to her community as well as more creative projects. In many ways, it appears that she learned new ways and methods of learning aside from the ones that brought her success in the classroom. She developed an interest in learning rather than just an interest in succeeding. [Photo credit: Daniel Soucy]
More than having deep roots in theory related to alternative education in India, during my work with the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative, we found that community-focused activities can also be extremely accessible. As one alternative to the previously-described ferry activity’s counting lesson, we brought students to Humayun’s Tomb, a UNESCO world heritage site. There we taught them how to make outlines of the tomb using a needle and thread. After the sewing activity, they counted the shapes in their design, measured the size of their creations and even added together the measurements. Aside from helping the students to practice a wide variety of math topics, the process of creating patterns also allowed us to nurture a relevant connection to the broader community’s heritage. In the Nizamuddin region of Delhi where Humayun’s Tomb is located, craftsmen have been working to reconstruct the Mughal stone patterns (jaalis) that were once common in this region’s architecture. The students noticed the similarities between the stone jaalis and their sewing and were quick to point out the jaalis that...
they encountered at other heritage sites. In this single activity, students were able to connect with the region’s heritage while also practicing math skills in a creative and thought-provoking manner.

More than merely promoting history and math-education, we also grounded many of the lessons in personal investigation and therefore promoted a new style of teaching and learning. The students were often asked to self-guide their own learning process regarding heritage by brainstorming questions that they could ask the project manager or a craftsman at the site prior to visiting. Therefore, in addition to practicing their Hindi, they developed a connection with an individual related to the heritage site and learned how to source
While not every community has a world heritage site in their backyard, every community does have a heritage. Every community has elders who can share their stories and help students look to the past. Engaging students with this past offers an inexpensive yet more interactive alternative to textbook-oriented curricula.

their own questions and knowledge rather than rely on other people to give them answers. We also developed an entire lesson focused exclusively on interviewing elders from the community about their experiences from the past. In doing so, we gave the students the autonomy to choose what they wanted to learn while also demonstrating to them that learning can be an individual and confidence-building process guided through forms other than a text. The best part is that all we needed to do as educators was provide each student with a guide for brainstorming questions as well as the space to interact with a person who interested them.

Of course, it is also important to appeal to different learning styles. Some young students are perhaps too shy or uncertain to ask questions in this manner. Therefore we also often compared old images of tombs prior to their interaction with the drawings and models that the students made during their visits to the tomb. By comparing and contrasting their observations with historical pictures, they learned about changes in the community in ways analogous to what other students could discern through interviews with elders. Simply moving outside the classroom created a sense of interest in learning through personal investigation and critical thinking that otherwise gets lost.

Of course, some might wonder how this project offers a solution in other regions and schools. Many students do not have such immediate access to such a historic built heritage. From our experience, we were able to develop alternative methods to encourage independent knowledge acquisition as well as interest in learning and community engagement through other, more universally applicable field trips. For example, during a lesson focused on “changes in the

*Students reading and illustrating a story about Rahim Khan's tomb after a site visit. [Photo credit: Mohammad Kabeer, Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative]*
community,” students visited a park near their school and recorded their observations of the environment. They counted birds and litter, completed leaf shading, drew their observations and learned to take detailed notes on how the environment changed during their time in it. After visiting the park and utilizing verbal cues from the teacher in order to identify what country and region each plant and bird species is native to, students drew their own interpretations of the birds’ habitats using their observations of where birds nested and ate. They then compared each of their physical and written observations with pictures of the community from before the parks were created. This simple exercise of conducting observations and thinking about how a space can change when it is not cared for, not only gave students an opportunity to pursue more independent forms of practicing their Hindi, mathematical, historical, and environmental skills, but it also allowed them to gain an appreciation for the space in which they live. Although not every community has access to sacred tombs or ancient structures, every community does have a history and a physical environment to explore. A field trip to a park, a temple, a mosque, an old house or simply to visit an elder community member can be every bit as engaging and productive as a trip to Humayun’s Tomb. It is therefore my belief that other schools and educators can also replicate this shift and thus create academic opportunities which encourage more students to think about their communities as valuable and worthy of care.
I would be remiss if I did not mention two more simple but very important ways in which we easily incorporated heritage into usually rote methods: stories and art. Often times, I would write a story in Hindi about the history of a specific location and the people associated with its creation. Some stories would have underlying messages which encouraged the students to take care of buildings and outdoor spaces while others would ask the students to self-illustrate each page based on what they observed on the field trip. Aside from being universally applicable due to the fact that stories can be created about any community asset – from an old temple to a school – they also teach reading skills and history. Stories can also be completed individually, in a group or as a full class depending on the class’s particular set of skills. Similarly, art projects like sewing jaali patterns, designing a floor plan of a historic building or creating models of an animal’s habitats using play-dough were all inexpensive methods which allowed us to excite students about learning and appreciating their surroundings in ways that textbooks and lectures could not.

Although I have outlined just a few ways in which we promoted the students’ interests by incorporating the community into their learning, I would like to note that each method utilized a variety of inexpensive and easily accessible tactics. While many “alternative” methods may rely on expensive technology, new sporting venues or complex activities, our methods are largely dependent on the places and people that surround the students as well as the students’ excitement to learn more actively. Thus, heritage-oriented lessons can engage students further in their learning processes and their communities in an equal but also high-quality manner: a dichotomy that some early practitioners in alternative education like Naik struggled to balance.15 While not every community has a world heritage site in their backyard, every community does have a heritage. Every community has elders who can share their stories and help students look to the past. Engaging students with this past offers an inexpensive yet more interactive alternative to textbook-oriented curricula. At the same time, it promotes a deeper passion in the students for their community’s well-being. Certainly, this is a powerful pedagogy to follow.

Recommendations: A Summary

- Create and utilize lesson materials which engage aspects of the local community you are working in.
  Engage the culture, art, people, and places that make the community unique rather than relying exclusively on outside materials.

- Incorporate more hands-on and interactive learning materials.
  Art, guest speakers, interviews, and field trips to community sites can all be utilized to interest students as well as engage the community without sacrificing traditional math and Hindi learning outcomes.
Daniel with students on a field trip to Sunder Nursery, following a variety of activities mapping flowers’ origins and learning about how to care for them in an urban setting.

[Photo credit: Mohammad Kabeer, Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative]
P. Rajagopal, co-founder of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam and a renowned actor and playwright. [Photo credit: Kattaikkuttu Sangam]
ARTS IN EDUCATION: 
Theatre Training as a Tool for Social and Economic Development

_Tessa Romanski_

While India has boasted a strong economic growth rate in the last decade, growing 6.7% in 2017\(^\text{16}\), there is still persistent inequality among the country’s most marginalized groups, including scheduled castes, tribal and rural populations, minority religions, and women.\(^\text{17}\) Additionally, in a country that has the largest youth population and is home to over 1.3 billion people, over 30% of India’s youth are NEETs (not in employment, education, or training), according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).\(^\text{18}\) This, as well as the perpetual struggle to deliver high-quality education to rural primary-level students, has led to alternative and innovative development strategies to address these issues. One such program is the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam, an initiative developed by Kattaikkuttu Sangam, striving to provide quality education to rural children in Tamil Nadu by providing _kattaikkuttu_ training in order to increase earning potential and career opportunities after 10th and 12th standards.

**Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam: Education in Many Forms**

_Kattaikkuttu_, a rural Tamil theater form incorporating music and movement through stylistic expression, has a complex history in the South Indian regions. Often seen as a dying art form for the rural poor,\(^\text{19}\)

> Tessa Romanski served as AIF Clinton Fellow with Kattaikkuttu Sangam in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu
companies often host between 100 and 150 all-night performances to crowds of anywhere from 100 to 2000 audience members during the season (usually January to October).\textsuperscript{20} Despite those figures there is a dearth of systematic research on the tradition. To better understand and analyze the social and artistic dimensions of \textit{kattaikkuttu}, we need statistical data regarding its present popularity, demographic information of the audiences, average income of a \textit{kuttu} player, influences to why individuals become \textit{kuttu} players, and aspirations and trajectories company members may pursue. While recognizing this need, the following discussion about the impact of access to \textit{kuttu} education on the future of young, rural students draws heavily on conversations and experiences from the students as well as the school itself.

\textbf{The dual nature of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam ensures that talented \textit{kuttu} performers are being trained in the tradition while still receiving the education necessary to succeed in today’s modern world.}

The classification as merely a village or rural art form overlooks the richness of tradition inherent in \textit{kattaikkuttu}. The interest in this theater form is anything but dead in rural Tamil Nadu, where \textit{kuttu}
himself, a co-founder of the school and renowned *kuttu* actor and playwright, stopped schooling at the age of ten in order to maintain the rigorous performance schedules.\(^{22}\) The dual nature of the school ensures that talented *kuttu* performers are being trained in the tradition while still receiving the education necessary to succeed in today’s modern world. Conversely, this also ensures that students not ordinarily exposed to artistic training are able to explore an alternative career choice as a *kuttu* artist. Most notably, the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam is the first artistic training center to allow girls to perform in a traditionally male-dominated genre (many female roles have, and still are, played by male actors in female attire). In an area where girls are often still married off shortly after reaching puberty, the opportunity to not only stay in school but also learn movement, singing, and performance art in a safe, inclusive space can be life changing. One student talks about learning how to be confident in her body through playing the character of Draupadi, one of the strongest characters in the *Mahabharata*. By learning how to move through the physicality of Draupadi’s movements in the performance, she has also learned how to take up space for herself in society and feels

\[\text{△} \text{ Rajas (kings) in the youth performance “Vilaiyattin Vilaivu” (War Games). [Photo credit: Akshya Balaraman]}\]
more comfortable with her body. Several 10th standard girls often mention that learning how to sing in front of their peers gives them more confidence to speak up in class. Knowing that they have a powerful voice that can be heard on stage by hundreds of spectators has given them a voice in other areas in their lives – which is extremely valuable as they fight to stay in school while their families discuss marriage.

**Embodying Empowerment**

Perhaps most moving, one 12th standard female student discusses the impact of playing Vikarna in the production of *Dice and Disrobing Draupadi*. In the performance, Draupadi is physically dragged about the stage and threatened with public disrobing. Vikarna, a male character, is the only one on stage who objects to the humiliation and defends Draupadi. By playing the male Vikarna and publicly defending a woman’s honor in front of others, the female student speaks about feeling strong enough to now stand up for herself and others, in addition to having a better understanding of the importance of respect for women. When performing *kuttu*, these girls take on both female and male personas that allow them to learn other ways of acting that are not traditionally thought of as “feminine” in their culture. Through their acting, singing, and dancing, this power and confidence can transfer over to other aspects of their lives, something that can have a profound impact on a young rural girl.

In addition to education and confidence, Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam also gives students increased earning potential. A traditional eight-hour, all-night *kuttu* performance is sanctioned by a village, which pays a flat rate to the company. The profit is then divided throughout the company based on a shared system agreed upon ahead of time in which each actor or musician receives a portion of the payment. There is little public information about the earnings of most rural *kuttu* companies, so data on income, show earnings, or other information for analysis is not available. However, students at the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam see their training as directly correlated to their future earnings. By performing Saturday evenings through the Kattaikkuttu Young Professionals’ Company, they get acclimated to the rigors of performing a physically demanding art form all night in front of an audience while also beginning to earn money. After they graduate 12th standard, they then have the option to join one of several other companies in the area or stay at the Gurukulam. Three recent students of the Gurukulam have been paying for their college education by performing *kuttu* on the weekends and mentoring current students. Two 12th standard students mention a similar plan: rather than an anomaly, it is now widely accepted by
most students that performing *kuttu* after secondary school can help pay for further studies. Performing is also seen as a way to help out their families back home. Virtually all students come from homes making 10,000 rupees or less per month (USD 120), so any additional income to the family budget makes a huge difference. Indeed, the earning potential of the female students often helps persuade their families to allow them to stay at school and continue performing longer than they would be allowed otherwise. Giving the students access to training for an art form in tandem with a good education broadens their opportunities beyond what they otherwise may have thought possible.
Culture, Context, and Commitment

However, it also needs to be realized that the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam works in a localized context and its success is geographically and demographically dependent on a rural setting in Tamil Nadu. The example of combining kuttu training with more traditional education would not work on a scaled-up model for the whole of India. However, the concept of an arts-based training and general education residence could definitely find its place in the diverse, numerous traditions across India. Kuttu is a Tamil-language based, non-Brahmanical, rural art form, and as such has only a finite audience demand. Situating schools in the appropriate historic-artistic contexts – Yakshagana, Swang, Bhand Pather, Ankiya Naat Bhaona – would be essential for other programs’ successes. Furthermore, the years of training required and the physical exertion from the performances make it unlikely that it would suit most students (or would be considered “appropriate” after having climbed the educational or economic ladder). One of the reasons the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam has not expanded its student base (beyond the question of funding) is simply that to be successful in its mission requires small class sizes and individualized attention. However, as discussed above, the student’s involvement in kuttu or other traditions elsewhere, can increase the income of a whole family, as often students send the money they make from performing to their homes.

It also needs to be kept in mind that simple access to the training and education does not necessarily equate to the positive changes mentioned above. Some students suffer from what Amartya Sen termed the “choice inhibition: when the individual is, in principle, free to choose, but cannot in practice exercise that choice.”25 One such example is the second-ever professional female kuttu performer, who recently left her company due to pressure from her family to marry and adopt a more socially acceptable way of life. After nearly 15 years of training and performing – travelling to Switzerland, Paris, and across India – she ultimately did not have the freedom to choose to live as a professional kuttu actor. Social constraints, such as the idea that kuttu is a low-class art form, or family constraints, like pressure to marry or work in technological jobs, can create strong barriers that cannot be overcome with simply giving students the tools and training needed to become performers.\(^26\)

Community Support for Rising Performers

Therefore, access to education (in this case, kuttu training as well as traditional schooling) can be a powerful catalyst in a disadvantaged student’s life. Increased earning potential as a kuttu performer, physical autonomy stemming from the movement training inherent in kuttu and myriad other unquantifiable benefits from growing up in a safe, inclusive space at the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam are invaluable opportunities. For girls specifically, being allowed to have control over their bodies and to develop a sense of freedom while at the school, regardless of their path after leaving, is doubtlessly immeasurable for their mental health and resilience. Furthermore, the mere fact that most students come
to school with significant learning backlogs, mental or emotional trauma, and other difficulties arising from their home situations means that the impact of having individualized attention, loving adult caretakers and teachers, and a possibility for future employment, can change a student’s life. But access and care are not the only factors in the success of the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam. Without support from family or society, the choice to become a professional kuttu player can be a lonely one. Thus, when looking at the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam specifically, and vocational education more broadly, it is crucial to realize that access to training for a specific employment opportunity is only one piece of the puzzle. Focusing only on outcomes, future earnings, or number of students trained, while statistically valid, often overlooks the history and journey of an individual student. For some students, getting their families to allow them to stay in school until 10th standard is a significant accomplishment, while others are expected to go to university. Having access to the same training is beneficial for both types of students, but the end result will differ. Depending on family situations, some will be allowed to perform for many years, while others will never perform again once they leave the school. It is crucial to realize that the argument for access to kuttu training should not depend on the number of kuttu performers successfully placed in companies, their increase in income, or other quantitatively measurable variables, but rather on the overall impact this training has on each student’s life. This is perhaps an opinion often unpopular with funders and policy makers, but one that takes into account the whole student and local situation as opposed to simple facts and figures.
LIBRARY INNOVATIONS:
Improving Adivasi Educational Access

*Nishant Gokhale*

Education for indigenous peoples has been a difficult and often controversial subject globally. While indigenous communities in North America and Australia were subject to the horrors of industrial schools, the experiences amongst India’s Adivasi and tribal communities have been quite different. India does not use the terminology of “indigenous,” preferring instead the legal category of “Scheduled Tribe.” In the region that I served as an AIF Clinton Fellow, these communities collectively self-identify as “Adivasi,” while in other parts of India, they may prefer the use of the term “tribal.”

Historically, Adivasi and tribal communities have largely been excluded from formal education systems. This was justified by using pejorative terms like “backward”, “wild”, and “uncivilized” to negate their humanity. While several voluntary organizations started schools for these communities, many often harbored either vested religious or ideological interests or failed to suitably tailor the education to the unique contexts of these communities. Besides, the organizations that did innovate educational pedagogies pertinent to Adivasi communities did not always have the resources to replicate their success stories. The stigmatization of membership of these communities has caused incalculable harm to their self-worth. This is something that the current educational system needs to address as an urgent priority. While the Right to Education Act

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in 2006 made primary education compulsory between 6-14 years of age and the subsequent government schemes created critical educational infrastructure, their impact for Adivasi and tribal communities has been limited. This article examines the role of a library as a multiplier to supplement the formal education system among Adivasi communities.

Educational Challenges Amongst Eastern Gujarat’s Adivasi Communities

As an AIF Clinton Fellow, I was placed with the library of the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre’s Adivasi Academy (“the Academy”). The library has over 50,000 books in various languages spanning multiple disciplines. It has been developed with the intention of serving both research scholars and the predominantly Adivasi local community. There exist many challenges in the library in serving the local community of Gujarat’s Chhota Udaipur District. The 2011 Census notes that literacy rates for Scheduled Tribes in the district are just 37.88%. In the district, 50.36% of Adivasi boys are literate and just 23.63% of Adivasi girls are literate.27 The role of the library in this region becomes critical for improving educational outcomes. While it cannot replace the existing educational system, it plays an important role in supplementing its efforts. For this, the library needs to play more than just its conventional functions of collecting, storing, and lending books, but serve as a site for teaching, learning, and remembering community histories.

Although there are several innovative models of how libraries can be utilized as community centers, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Solutions vary based on the challenges present, innovative thinking, and deployment of available resources.

In the United States, the Yavapai Native American nation has started a Children’s Corner where they use games and digital media to encourage young readers in the tribe.28 In Canada, the University of British Columbia has launched the “Indigitization” program which archives oral histories and other audio-visual materials for various indigenous communities.29
In India, there are government-run tribal research institutes whose holdings focus on materials about instead of by tribal and Adivasi communities. These institutions are also mostly for advanced researchers rather than for children and young readers. Alternatively, some experimentation with libraries amongst Adivasi communities has been tried. In Madhya Pradesh\(^\text{30}\) and West Bengal\(^\text{31}\), mobile libraries for children in denotified and scheduled tribal communities have provided them with a chance to read books in their own languages.

Among these indigenous-centered efforts, the Academy library where I served is unique. Not only a facility for researchers and academics who are interested in Adivasi, tribal, and indigenous issues, the Academy also considers members of the Adivasi community to be stakeholders in developing a platform for preserving Adivasi memory and knowledge and for bolstering cultural identity. Through its work and partnerships with the community, the Academy has identified three specific challenges in which it can serve as a resource.

Amazing things happen when students gather in the Academy to read together! Vasantshala students often visit the library after lunch, before afternoon classes resume. They teach each other a lot during this time, in ways that are very different from classroom teaching. While each of them pick up something to read and read aloud, the moment one of the boys encounters a difficult word, the others (quite literally!) jump in to help. This is just one of the ways that libraries help to quietly but positively reinforce formal learning.

[Photo credit: Nishant Gokhale]
The first is forced annual migration due to small land holdings which lack irrigation. Adivasi families migrate to nearby towns to work as building and farm labor because agricultural income from their own land is insufficient to last them through the year.

The second is the language barrier, which arises from the numerous Adivasi communities’ languages. Government school teachers often come from different parts of the state and are transferred away before they are fluent in these Adivasi languages. Thus, they often end up teaching in Gujarati, the official medium of instruction. Given the variance with their mother-tongue, Adivasi children often find it difficult to understand concepts when explained in Gujarati.

The third is that many Adivasi students are first generation learners. Many students find it difficult to sustain interest in the curriculum, which is seldom relatable to their family’s or community’s daily lives, history, and culture. There appears to be little or no flexibility with the standard state curriculum in government schools to retain student interest.

It is in the face of these challenges that libraries play an important role. While they cannot replace schools, they can act as effective force multipliers that complement the efforts of schools. While schools provide the basic tools to acquire knowledge and foster a natural sense of curiosity amongst students, libraries provide young learners with the space and the resources to give it wings.

Vasantshala: Adivasi Education with a Difference

To tackle the challenges of Adivasi education, the Academy began Vasantshala, a non-formal school for 60 Adivasi children between 6-12 years of age in 2005. Vasantshala is residential to ensure that migration by parents doesn’t result in children dropping out of school. The teachers are all from Adivasi communities from across Gujarat and speak various Adivasi languages. The curriculum is taught in their mother tongues and in Gujarati so that the children are able to grasp concepts easily and pick up on them once they join government schools at age-appropriate grades. The aim is to bridge the learning gaps of out-of-school children first through their mother tongues and then by transitioning them from their native languages to Gujarati, thereby enabling them to continue their schooling. Apart from regular school subjects, the curriculum also includes activity-based programs such as music, story-telling, environmental studies,
painting, and agriculture. Unlike regular schooling which only follows rigid time-tables, students are encouraged to participate in regular activity sessions designed to foster the child’s natural curiosity and to build a strong foundation rooted in Adivasi identity. Independent learning plays an important part of the Vasantshala model. On Sundays or after classes finish in the afternoon, students are encouraged to explore the library and are free to pick up any of its many multilingual children’s books and magazines which interest them. Unstructured time in the library fosters a number of important connections. Older children teach younger children in ways that nearly no teacher accomplishes by doing things like helping read big words, explaining the stories, and asking questions. A teacher or librarian is always on hand if the children cannot comprehend something. Most significantly, the library becomes a part of the daily environment which helps children discover a world of books and knowledge beyond their school textbooks.

Widening the Adivasi Academy Library’s Network

Since Vasantshala’s capacity is limited to 60 children, it cannot accommodate all the Adivasi children who want to join it. To widen the reach of activity-based learning and library-based self-learning to nearby government schools which have very limited resources, the Academy hosted the first Bal Utsav (children’s fair) in March 2019. This multi-day event sought to foster stronger linkages between the Academy and the local community while providing a platform to hand down traditional knowledge to the next generation of Adivasi youth. Nearly 400 students and teachers from five nearby government schools participated in the event. There were inter-school sports matches which drew large crowds and also craft workshops for which local Adivasi artisans were invited. The children (and teachers!) got to work with clay, bamboo, beads, plant
fibers, and wood. Apart from making articles such as earthen utensils, cane baskets, toys, brooms etc., they were told about the cultural significance around these items. They learned that while these were earlier easily available in local markets and made from locally sourced materials, they have been replaced by factory-made plastic or metal products. This has meant that the largely self-sufficient rural economy has been forced to rely on urban factories: traditional craftspeople are losing out to machine-made goods.

The *Bal Utsav* also presented an occasion for teachers to meet at the Academy’s library and discuss how best to use the library’s resources to make it an important part of the lives of Adivasi students. It turned out that many of the government schools had libraries but did not have books which would engage beginning readers. While the Academy’s library has a number of children’s books and is free to use, its distance from their villages deters students from visiting by themselves. To overcome this hurdle, it was decided that the Academy would start a free book distribution service to five selected schools. Every two months, carefully selected books would be dropped off, collected, and circulated to a different school by the Academy. Books which have many illustrations, stories relatable to Adivasi children, multilingual books or those printed in Adivasi languages are the ones circulated. Many such books are available at the Academy library. Bhasha has itself published *Bol*, an illustrated children’s magazine which too could be

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circulated. The schools would each nominate some children to maintain a circulation register so that they feel a common sense of responsibility towards the books and the work of the Academy. It would also help to develop organization and leadership skills among the children. To sustain interest, the Adivasi Academy’s staff will also periodically hold library orientations, book readings, drawing, painting, music, and dance events for the children. Based on the results and feedback from these events, this program and the mobile library can be extended to more remote schools in the district. These outreach events will hopefully offer the Adivasi youth of Chhota Udaipur district the tools to discover the rich holdings of the Academy library and equip them with the necessary tools to tackle the serious educational and existential challenges that they face.

Given the warm reception that the Bal Utsav earned, it was decided to make it a quarterly event. Inputs would be sought from the teachers for its future editions so that there is a sense of community ownership of this program. Although the library program will only be rolled out once schools reopen after the summer break, it addresses gaps left in government education programs and mediates between the situation at the Academy’s library of “books without readers” and the situation at the government schools of “readers without books.”

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While this may seem like a very small step, it is perhaps through such sustained local initiatives that community participation can be ensured. Much like a seed, government schemes and efforts by civil society groups alone cannot ensure that it takes root. What it requires is a conducive environment which can be provided and sustained by the local community.

While libraries themselves cannot teach children the way schools do, they are important force multipliers. There is an urgent need for libraries, particularly in rural and underserved areas, to be seen as more than conventional book-reading and storage spaces but as spaces for innovation and pivots of social change. In these underserved areas, every person who visits a library presents potential and everyone who comes back represents success.
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION:
Balancing Development and Biodiversity in Ladakh

Alexandra Barteldt

With one of the world’s harshest, high altitude, and extreme climates, Ladakh is nonetheless a place of harmony, balance, and biodiversity. For centuries, people have lived here in tandem with the ebbs of the Earth, and young and old alike possess a remarkable breadth of knowledge of their surrounding environment and their humble place within it. However, in the face of commercial and infrastructural development, Ladakhi people are increasingly losing touch with this connection. Through cultivating community relationships, teaching and learning from the silent joys of Ladakh’s soil to the flick of the elusive snow leopard’s tail, as well as an occasional high-altitude haiku, I’ve partnered with the people of Ladakh to encourage place-based environmental education and awareness through the Snow Leopard Conservancy, India Trust (SLC-IT). By combining kinetic and thought-provoking activities with engaging discussions in the development of an outdoor, experiential biodiversity park, Ladakhi students are learning from their surroundings and taking ownership and pride in their rich culture of balance, while I’m finding my own balance within that spectrum, too.

Alexandra Barteldt served as AIF Clinton Fellow with the Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust in Leh, Ladakh
“Ecosystem art,  
From soils to glaciers to us,  
Interconnected.”

My favorite accomplishment while working with SLC-IT was bringing artistic learning to students and communities. This workshop was my first experiment in using art as a tool to lead student discussions, allowing students to relax and speak about the environment and ecosystem balance based on their own collective knowledge. Rather than bringing in PowerPoint presentations or a formal lesson plan, we discovered that allowing the students to shape the structure of the discussions and learning outcomes themselves was so much more meaningful for everyone. The success of this small workshop inspired us to host an art competition in honor of World Migratory Bird Day, in which students from surrounding schools came to discuss the challenges facing Ladakh’s migratory birds and wetlands through artistic expression.

(Haiku credit: Alexandra Barteldt; photo credit: Thinless Lamo)

Elements of Earth and Education

With over a thousand plant species, resourcefully adapted wildlife, geological phenomena, and precious glacial water, the people of Ladakh have thrived in a meager bounty of what they refer to as “the jewels of the mountains.” These jewels have become my teaching tools and inspiration for experiential, place-based education with the Government High School in Matho village. The concept for the biodiversity park is to provide a sustainable and unique way for teachers to engage students outside, learning hands-on from their own environment rather than from locally irrelevant textbooks. Split into different themes of Ladakh’s aquatic life, mammals, birds, insects, and traditional as well as medicinal agricultural methods, the biodiversity park allows for learning through experience and tangible involvement.

In designing lesson plans to accompany these elements of the biodiversity park, I collaborated with colleagues in the field of conservation and development, as well as school faculty and village education committees, to find the most important subjects to tackle with students in order for them to begin thinking critically about the
future of Ladakh. While learning about soils, geology, wildlife, and agriculture, students also learn about waste management, composting, and the challenges that Ladakh faces with the influx of tourism and lifestyle changes. In my experience with students, they come to life when they are able to discuss their beautiful home and the jewels that make it so special, as well as how they are responsible for its fate.

In recent years across Ladakh, more and more rural families have been shifting to Leh to provide their children with a private, more globally-geared education. As a result, enrollment in rural government schools has been dwindling and many village schools have been forced to shut down. My project through SLC-IT not only seeks to protect Ladakhi ecosystems through education but also to foster an invested love and excitement for learning in nature in a local context. Rather than relying on methods of rote memorization and preparing students for work environments they may have no interest in, my project will allow educators to offer place-based education: knowledge they can see, smell, hear, taste, and touch. Janice Woodhouse and Clifford Knapp offer a compelling argument of the value of place-based education in the context of conservation:

Some critics of place-based education believe that the primary goal of schooling should be to prepare students to work and function in a highly technological and consumer-oriented society. In contrast, place-based educators believe that education should prepare people to live and work to sustain the cultural and ecological integrity of the places they inhabit. To do this, people must have knowledge of ecological patterns, systems of causation, and the long-term effects of human actions on those patterns. One of the most compelling reasons to adopt place-based education is to provide students with the knowledge and experiences needed to actively participate in their own contexts.32

In a setting such as Ladakh, one of the world’s most unique and fragile ecosystems, it is imperative to provide students with the opportunity to fall in love with the Earth beneath their very feet. SLC-IT’s biodiversity park and interactive lessons intend to combine existing classroom material with new, exciting, and relevant lessons to be learned outside, from their very own natural schoolyard. The hope is that by combining the two, students will internalize and identify with the things they learn and develop a whole new attitude towards going to school each day.
Joan James and Theresa Williams affirm the connection between experiential methods and long-term learning:

Application of environmental science concepts in experiential, real-life field contexts is extremely valuable. Scaffolding the learning from the classroom to the field and then back to the classroom results in memorable, comprehensive, and long-term learning. Although this type of learning holds immense benefits for all students, it is particularly valuable for students who struggle with traditional school tasks or have developed an apathetic stance toward school and learning.\(^{33}\)

Based on James’ and Williams’ assessment of experiential learning, Ladakhi students, who remain in their local contexts rather than transferring to urban schools, should have the opportunity to experience context-relevant lessons and enjoy learning in the field. It is with that intention that I partnered with SLC-IT and the community of Matho, to provide students the chance to appreciate their native Ladakh, balancing their opportunities for a global education with the beautiful teachings of Ladakh’s generations, balancing the “jewels of the mountains.”

**Opportunities of Community and Cooperation**

In addition to SLC-IT’s own projects in education and community initiatives, SLC-IT has forged collaborations with Leh’s NGOs that are working toward people-powered sustainable development and cultural celebration. These find an important voice in the collective programs organized by the Ladakh NGO Forum. During my time here, SLC-IT has taken part in hosting “heritage walks” through Leh’s historic old town, in which students and locals learn about the history and stories behind each hidden nook and cranny. We’ve facilitated performances of traditional, organic agriculture, as well as songs and dances by students of these organizations. We also organized an art competition, bird watching, and discussion activities in honor of World Migratory Bird Day, in which various schools including SECMOL (Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh) and LEDeG (Ladakh Ecological Development Group) participated.

It continues to inspire me how so many people, both young and old, can come together at the drop of a hat to be a part of a greater cause. I sincerely believe in the impact that SLC-IT’s biodiversity park and local lessons can have on inspiring the youth of Ladakh.

I recently had a conversation with a young Ladakhi man who runs an ecological shop in Leh market. It probably began with him asking me, “Why are you still
“Place-based, outdoor ed, 
Ghost of the outdoor classroom, 
Ladakh’s snow leopard.”

This photograph was taken during my first snow leopard sighting in Sham Valley, with SLC-IT’s Jigmet Dadul and a young boy named Stanzin. Around 16 years old, Stanzin has worked with SLC-IT programs as a nature guide and host. Having dropped out of school, he was more interested in learning from his surroundings and local Ladakhi context than in the traditional classroom. During my time with him, he could eagerly identify every living thing we came across and was skilled in tracking wildlife – skills he would probably not have learned from school. My Fellowship project aimed to provide opportunities for students like Stanzin to connect with their environment and local wildlife in tandem with traditional schooling, inspiring a love for learning and a commitment to place-based education. [Haiku and photo credit: Alexandra Barteldt]
here?” A common question posed to the few foreigners who stay on in Ladakh through the winter. I was telling him about my education projects through SLC-IT, very animatedly describing our medicinal garden, lessons and illustrated signboards, when all of a sudden he scoffed and said, “Everyone does things like that, it never makes a difference.” Although I was initially hurt, his opinion was incredibly valid. He has witnessed development and change in Ladakh, for better or worse, and although he runs a successful and beloved shop, he has little hope for the future of Ladakh and the power of his people to rise up and effect positive change.

I would like to disagree. Of all of the places I have had the opportunity to live and work in, immersing myself in a new culture, Ladakh is by far the most communal and people-powered community I have ever had the privilege to experience. I’ve seen entire villages rally together to till, sow, and irrigate kilometers of farmland. I’ve seen men and women alike working hard for the Earth and for each other, sharing everything from yak curd to their own roof, from a warm fire to an even warmer smile. I’ve seen students laugh, play, teach, and learn from one another about Ladakh’s ecosystem and sustainable way of life. I’ve asked a young boy what he wanted to be when he grew up, to which he proudly professed that he aspires to be a dimo (a female yak) when he grows up, so he can be strong and help and generously provide his dairy. This example of a young man of Ladakh who is proud of his local lifestyle, shows the possibility of youth to be prepared to face the future with positivity and a sense of humor. This is why place-based education makes a difference: to allow young people to continue investing in the power of their own people and age-old ways of life.

Hope is the people
Seeds, roots, brief flowers are we
Partners with Earth.

I realize that I am a foreigner, merely passing through in a blip of Ladakh’s timeline in development. However, the relationships I’ve made in this short time, and the passion I’ve seen cultivated within that time, have magnified my faith in the people of Ladakh and their love for their landscape, culture, and one another. The power will always be with the people, and that will always make a difference.
“SECMOL’s ‘three R’ wall
Reduce, reuse, recycle
Place-based, eco school.”

▲ Responsible disposal wall at the Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement (SECMOL) of Ladakh, a local place-based educational facility near Leh. [Haiku and photo credit: Alexandra Barteldt]
ACCEPT, ACCESS, SUSTAIN: Menstrual Health Management for Women with Disabilities

Rachel Aier

Many taboos have historically been attached to menstruation, with few cultures across the world even acknowledging it as a natural phenomenon. These cultures fail to recognize the reality that the menstrual cycle is a process intrinsically linked with a woman’s body. As a result of these taboos, menstruation is directly related to many health problems of women and of women’s overall development – socially, educationally and professionally. India is one place where menstrual practices continue to be bound by superstition in many regions of the country.34

The Challenges of Menstrual Health Management

Where superstition prevails, women are considered impure and unclean during menstruation and are excluded from society during that period. According to a study conducted by the Tamil Nadu Urban Sanitation Support Programme (TNUSSP), around 84% of the adolescent girls interviewed said they were taken by surprise when they got their first period.35 Around 60%

Rachel Aier served as AIF Clinton Fellow with Samerth Charitable Trust in Raipur, Chhattisgarh
of women diagnosed with common reproductive tract infections reported poor menstrual hygiene, according to a 2012 United Nations Population Fund study. Furthermore, according to a 2015 study on menstrual hygiene practices, only 15% of women use commercial sanitary protection, while 85% use homemade products. In the interviews for this study, the products used during menstruation range from cloth to make-do pads stuffed with ash, husk or even sand. In a survey conducted in 2011, it was revealed that in North India, over 30% of the girls interviewed dropped out of school after they started menstruating.

Evil spirits, shame, and embarrassment surrounding sexual reproduction are some of the traditional associations for the taboos on menstruation. There has been the belief that menstrual blood is dangerous or that burning the menstrual cloth is necessary to prevent it from being used by evil spirits. Most women resist using a sanitary napkin because it is difficult to dispose of. They fear it might fall into the hands of someone who can use jadu tona (black magic) against them. These taboos force women to hide their menstruation. Poor protection and inadequate washing facilities may increase susceptibility to infection and fail to eliminate...
Women with disabilities in India are the most vulnerable and marginalized in society. The discrimination they face is two-fold: stigmatization associated with disability and with gender. With regard to menstruation, their situation is even worse. Among all the challenges they face, one in particular is the lack of access to toilets with disability-friendly features.

The odor of menstrual blood, which put girls at further risk of being stigmatized.

The situations of women with disabilities (WwDs) are even worse in regards to menstruation. Thus WwDs face two-fold discrimination: stigmatization associated with both their disability and with their gender. “Disability,” according to the World Health Organization, is an umbrella term that describes any impairment that limits activity or restricts participation. “Impairment” is a problem in body function or structure; an “activity limitation” is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a “participation restriction” is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in daily life situations. Disability is thus not just a health problem – it is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which that person lives. Therefore, “disability is a public health, a human right, and a development issue.”

Women with disabilities are the most vulnerable and marginalized in society. According to World Bank data on disability, there are about one billion people, or 15% of the world’s population, who experience some form of disability. In India, based on the 2011 census, there are 26.8 million Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), or 2.21% of the recorded population, out of which 2.41% are male PwDs and 2.01% are female PwDs. However, the issues faced by WwDs are often not visible to the general public, even among those who are actively promoting the rights of PwDs and those who are promoting gender equality. Consequently, there is not sufficient publicly accessible data available on these issues. Gender, disability, and health are not only interconnected with each other, but women with disabilities are at a higher risk of chronic health issues as well. The lack of general accessibility is one reason for the disadvantaged situation for women with disabilities. The issues of accessibility can relate to education, health services, employment opportunities, transportation, and social and political rights.

Overcoming Challenges

The Government of India has introduced schemes to tackle the consequences resulting from the widespread taboo attached to menstruation. One primary effort works to distribute free sanitary napkins to overcome the financial barriers to accessing hygienic products. In the case of WwDs, many are already considered a burden by their families, therefore spending an extra amount is something unthinkable for the majority who...
are economically disadvantaged. Under the National Rural Health Mission, low-cost sanitary napkins have been locally made and distributed, particularly in rural and slum areas, to combat the unhygienic practices of using a cloth and unclean sanitary pads. However, standard sanitary napkins are non-biodegradable and thus hazardous for the environment if improperly disposed of. These polymeric sanitary napkins have replaced cloth napkins to a great extent, but they are also leading to the accumulation of used napkins in landfills.

In response, Samerth Charitable Trust, my AIF Clinton Fellowship host organization, is implementing the “Social Inclusion Program of Sightsavers” in Chhattisgarh, with a training on menstruation health management in Raipur. It is comprised of multiple interventions to explore and promote partnerships with local communities. First, a one-day workshop on menstruation hygiene management is hosted for women interested in participating in a skills-training workshop. Before joining a subsequent two-day skills-training workshop, participants discuss their conceptions of

PwD participants learn to make eco-friendly sanitary pads during a workshop.
[Photo credit: Shyam Singh, Samerth Charitable Trust]
The Government of India has introduced schemes to tackle the many consequences resulting from the taboo attached to menstruation. Under the National Rural Health Mission, low-cost sanitary napkins were locally made and distributed to combat the unhygienic practices of using cloth and unclean materials. However, standard sanitary napkins are considered to be non-biodegradable and harm the environment if improperly disposed.

menstruation, what they have learned from the previous workshop, and what they have adopted for their own menstruation health management as a result.

The training workshops aim to promote health and hygiene among WwDs by focusing on gender issues, pregnancy, reproductive organs, and menstruation as a natural phenomenon in women. The training provides the participants with skills for making low-cost, eco-friendly sanitary napkins for themselves and for selling products in local markets through their PwDs Self-Help Group (SHG). This has created a platform for WwDs to address and accept the issues related to the menstrual cycle openly while also creating a new platform for self-care, understanding, and producing accessible resources as a community. It has economically empowered participants by creating a market that promotes their income activity. In particular, the participants are now spreading awareness and contributing to a sustainable environment with locally-made products.

One common experience that participants often speak about is how, before the workshop, they tried to hide their menstruation or how others in their families or communities tried to force them to hide it. They detail how they were not allowed to go to the kitchen, places of worship, and faced other restrictions in mobility and social inclusion. They were also not allowed to go out of their houses, which negatively impacted a significant portion of their work and general employment opportunities. They often describe their previous practice of using cloths during menstruation, which caused skin problems and infections. Before the workshop, many of these women who used sanitary pads available in the market, recounted that they either threw them into the garbage or into the river after use. This can cause serious environmental issues and, due to the local ecosystem, may come back to affect their health in the long term. During workshops, therefore, this matter is given due attention as well.

Mobilizing to Break Taboos and Transform Communities

Since their participation in the workshop, WwDs in the SHG have not only been making sanitary pads for themselves and to sell on the marketplace, but equally importantly, they have been sensitized about the importance of proactive and informed communication about menstrual health. We have witnessed significant attitudinal change after the training, with women now openly discussing menstrual hygiene management
Samerth Charitable Trust first organizes a one-day workshop on menstrual hygiene management for women with disabilities interested in participating in their two-day training workshop for making eco-friendly sanitary pads. [Photo credits: Shyam Singh, Samerth Charitable Trust]

The training provided the participants with skills for making low-cost, eco-friendly sanitary napkins for themselves and for selling in local markets through their PwD Self-Help Group (SHG). It has economically empowered participants by creating a market that promotes their income activity. In sum, the participants are now spreading awareness and contributing to a sustainable environment with a locally-made product.

with other SHG members continuing to go to their workplaces, and seeking employment even during menstruation. The women have gained more confidence in themselves to address health issues attached to menstruation and are able to find solutions with other SHG members.

These experiences demonstrate why there must be accessible resources available in local communities which ensure women’s health and utilize sustainable materials that are not harmful to the environment in the long term. Samerth Charitable Trust’s trainings and community partnerships are a powerful model of how one community of women is striving to do just that.
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The Rural India Supporting Trust’s (RIST) mission is to work towards creating an equitable society within all communities in India. In facing this challenge, they are a strategic partner of the American India Foundation (AIF), supporting the William J. Clinton Fellowship for Service in India and other AIF signature programs. From 2017-19, RIST supported the AIF Clinton Fellowship to dispatch ten Fellows to Uttarakhand and other under-served regions of India. The grant given by RIST supported the selection, deployment, and training of Fellows, as well as programmatic conferences, publications, capacity building, monitoring and research, and the dissemination of knowledge through a post-program service component. RIST and AIF are partnering to enhance capacity and impact of India’s social sector through channeling specialized skills, knowledge, and best practices to areas of greatest need. Equally important, due to the U.S.-India cross-cultural exchange of the bi-national cohort of Fellows, we create an ecosystem of understanding and cooperation, to forge strong ties between the global leaders of tomorrow.

LATA KRISHNAN AND AJAY SHAH

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