

perspectives

A Quarterly Viewletter

Vol 4 | Issue 2 | September 2025

Bridging the Education Divide: Collaborative Models for Quality and Access in Rural India

GUEST VIEW

Close your eyes. Visualise the first day of a village school reopening after the summer vacations.

Little children clutching their parents' hands tightly. Some, nervously and others with anticipation, walking towards the Grade 1 classroom. Further down the corridor, older children are streaming into the Grade 6 classroom with energy and enthusiasm.

Soon, the bell rings and the teachers begin their classes with the children seated in front of them. Many experienced teachers know the task that lies ahead as they navigate the school year.

The Grade 1 teacher has different kinds of children in her class. Some have come after having spent a year or two in the village Anganwadis. These children have had some exposure to being away from home, being with other children, and participating in learning activities with their friends. But there are children who have come straight from home into Grade 1. These children, for the first time, are inside a building called the school, sitting in a room full of desks and chairs, surrounded by many other children. These children have to get 'ready for school', 'ready for class', and they have to get ready for learning.

Down the hallway, the Grade 6 teacher is looking at her own class with fresh eyes. She knows from past experience that some children have come from Grade 5 in that school straight into

Grade 6—the first class of middle school. But there are others who have come to the school for the first time, after completing Grade 5 in other schools in neighbouring villages. The whole class has to get to know each other and the teacher has to get to know the children. Our experienced Grade 6 teacher knows that although these children have completed five years of schooling, perhaps only half are comfortable with basic arithmetic, and a little more than half can confidently read and understand text.

Bridging the education divide in rural India is both a challenge and an opportunity. Despite major strides in enrollment and infrastructure, large

Bridging the education divide in rural India is both a challenge and an opportunity. Despite major strides in enrollment and infrastructure, large numbers of children are still not operating on a level playing field.

numbers of children are still not operating on a level playing field. Our village school knows that children do not come equally ready to deal with what the education system requires. Even after five years of schooling, there are wide variations in learning.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 accepts these challenges but provides new opportunities to bring



Rukmini Banerji
CEO, Pratham Education Foundation

equitable solutions to help every child be in school and learn well.

NEP 2020 brings the 3–6 age group within the mandate of the education system. It highlights the importance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in building the foundation for future learning. The operationalisation of NEP 2020 has enabled different states to implement ECE in a variety of ways. Some states are strengthening the ECE component in Anganwadis. Other states are creating pre-primary classes within primary schools, private schools. Even in rural areas, schools have always had Upper KG and Lower KG classes. The government also has mandated that only six-year-olds may proceed to be enrolled in Grade 1. These steps are designed to provide structural support to enable a level playing field for all children starting school.

As students progress, learning disparities widen. By the time of transition from Grade 5 to middle school, gaps in reading comprehension and basic mathematics become stark, leading to difficulties in coping with the demands of further schooling.

Based on the experiences and evidence from past years, NEP 2020 outlines a bold and ambitious goal. It declares that by the time a child reaches Grade 3, we must ensure that foundational literacy and numerous skills are in place. To translate this goal into action, the NIPUN Bharat mission has been conceptualised and is being implemented.

The recent data from Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024, and the PARAKH national survey show that

Big, bold, ambitious goals can be achieved if many people come together and work consistently towards them. Sustained collaborative and collective action towards achieving common goals can definitely bridge divides

significant learning gains have been made in the earlier years. This momentum is the result of collaborations between Anganwadis and schools, families, communities, and teachers, as well as the combined efforts of government, non-government, and corporate players working together to achieve national goals.

As a long-run player in pre-primary and primary education, Pratham also works with partners to develop approaches that strengthen the quality of teaching, learning and support that children receive.

Pratham works in two ways: first, by working directly with children, schools, communities, and families to understand gaps and develop solutions together; second, by embedding these

interventions within government systems at scale once they have proven effective through thorough evaluation and study.

For example, working with state governments, Pratham has supported Anganwadis and preschool programs, training educators and creating age-appropriate learning materials to bolster school readiness. Further, Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) is a proven, large-scale intervention that groups children by learning level rather than age or grade, helping lagging students, especially in Grades 3 and above, to 'catch up' in reading and math and to equalise learning opportunities.

Whether it is Pratham's work or the work of other partners, including the government, corporate, and

philanthropic, partnerships have often provided the necessary support for innovation and learning. There are many examples across India of collaborations with Indian corporates and CSR initiatives that provide resources, technology, and volunteer support, enabling rapid scale.

Big, bold, ambitious goals can be achieved if many people come together and work consistently towards them. India has achieved close to universal enrollment in schools because of widespread collaboration of this type. Now it is time for corporates, philanthropies, governments, and citizens to put efforts together to build a strong foundation for our children's learning. Sustained collaborative and collective action towards achieving common goals can definitely bridge divides.

Views expressed are personal.

MY VIEW

A Commitment For Change



Sunil Misra
CEO
CII Foundation

“ Education is the foundation of all progress. For a nation, prioritising education means prioritising equity, innovation, and growth. It is the single most effective way to disrupt cycles of disadvantage and unlock possibilities for generations. At the CII Foundation, education remains central to our mission of building inclusive and sustainable communities, where every child has the chance to learn, grow, and thrive. ”

Sustainable Development Goal 4

Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Education is the key that will allow many other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved. When people are able to get quality education they can break from the cycle of poverty.

Education helps to reduce inequalities and to reach gender equality. It also empowers people everywhere to live more healthy and sustainable lives. Education is also crucial to fostering tolerance between people and contributes to more peaceful societies.

Despite modest improvements in literacy, hundreds of millions of people remain illiterate, and women are disproportionately affected. The rise of digital societies necessitates the integration of technology into education, in order to ensure that young people and

future generations have access to relevant, high-quality content that prepares them for the demands of a rapidly evolving labour market.

To deliver on Goal 4, education financing must become a national investment priority. Furthermore, measures such as making education free and compulsory, increasing the number of teachers, improving basic school infrastructure and embracing digital transformation are essential.

Goal 4 Targets

Target 4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes

Target 4.2: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education

Target 4.3: By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university

Target 4.4: By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship

[Click here to read more](#)

From Margins to Mainstream: Rama Sharma's Fight for Girls' Right to Learn

In rural Rajasthan, where female literacy rates are among the lowest in the country, the idea of girls accessing quality education often feels like a distant dream. For generations, systemic poverty, entrenched patriarchal norms, and tribal marginalization have denied young girls the opportunity to read, write, and imagine a future beyond early marriage and domestic work. Yet, in this landscape of inequity, Rama Sharma, a 2019 Woman Exemplar Awardee in the Education category, emerged as a powerful force for change.

Rama has dedicated her life to bringing girls from some of Rajasthan's most disenfranchised communities, particularly the Banjara Muslim community, into the formal schooling system. Her approach is not only about

access but also about building the confidence, skills, and resilience that enable girls to thrive in mainstream education.

The Bridge School Model

Rama joined as a teacher at the Pehchanshala project, an innovative bridge school initiative run by the Centre for Unlocking Learning Potential (CULP), in 2003 in Trilokinathpura village, Tonk District, Rajasthan. The model is designed for out-of-school girls who, due to social restrictions or economic hardship, missed the chance of enrolling in school at the right age. By creating a flexible, supportive environment, Pehchanshalas equip these girls with foundational literacy, numeracy, and life skills before integrating them into mainstream government schools.



Rama has been a tireless advocate and implementer of this model, proving its effectiveness in some of the most challenging contexts.

Integrating Life Skills to Build Agency of Girls

Rama has championed life-skills education under the Pehchanshala model. This meant organizing various informational and awareness-generation workshops and trainings with girls on issues such as Adolescent Reproductive Sexual Health (ARSH), menstrual health and hygiene, sexual abuse, child rights, etc. She also plans periodic excursion trips that provide girls with a much-needed exposure to the outside world, thereby, raising their social and political awareness. In addition, she leads community events like the Balika Sammelan where girls have the opportunity to participate in different games, competitions, and shows. She has formed block-level Balika Manchs (adolescent girls' forum) that are collective platforms for girls to freely share their concerns and discuss issues that affect them.

The Pehchanshala model which Rama has implemented and refined over the years has led to significant changes in the lives of the girls and their communities.

A Personal Journey of Resilience

Rama's professional achievements are all the more remarkable given the personal challenges she has faced.

Married into a deeply patriarchal household, she has been the primary breadwinner, supporting her unemployed husband and in-laws. Yet instead of encouragement, she has often faced hostility for her work. Her personal life has been scarred by gender-based violence and the immense trauma of enduring multiple unsafe, forced abortions due to pressure to bear a son.

Despite these ordeals, Rama refused to let her circumstances define her. Instead, she drew strength from her experiences, using her pain as fuel to fight for other girls denied dignity and opportunity. Her story is one of resilience: a reminder that the most impactful change-makers are often those who transform their personal struggles into collective strength.

Rama's journey embodies the spirit of Teachers' Day. She is not just a teacher in the conventional sense but an educator in the truest sense of the word—guiding, nurturing, and opening doors for thousands of children

Shaping Futures, Shaping Policy

Her work has impacted more than 3900 girls. She has successfully mainstreamed over 300 girls directly under her guidance, many of whom have gone on to complete college. In regions where female literacy rates remain below 10 percent, this ripple effect is nothing short of revolutionary.

Because of the demonstrated success of her work, the Pehchanshala model of education is now an integral part of the government's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) system.

The lessons from leaders like Rama Sharma are clear: solutions must be rooted in communities, responsive to local needs, and driven by collaboration. Industry, civil society, and government each have a role to play in scaling such models, ensuring that no child, especially no girl, is left behind.

Rama's journey embodies the spirit of Teachers' Day. She is not just a teacher in the conventional sense but an educator in the truest sense of the word—guiding, nurturing, and opening doors for thousands of children who might otherwise have been forgotten. Her courage to stand against patriarchal norms and her dedication to transforming marginalized girls into confident learners mark her as a true exemplar of inclusive education.



To know more about CII Foundation's initiatives write to
Priya Shirali, Head - Communication at Priya.Shirali@cii.in

Copyright © (2025) Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), in part or full in any manner whatsoever, or translated into any language, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner. CII has made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information and material presented in this document. Nonetheless, all information, estimates and opinions contained in this publication are subject to change without notice, and do not constitute professional advice in any manner. Neither CII nor any of its office bearers or analysts or employees accept or assume any responsibility or liability in respect of the information provided herein. However, any discrepancy, error, etc. found in this publication may please be brought to the notice of CII for appropriate correction.

Published by The CII Foundation