

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Education in Rural Odisha and Response Through Community-Led Education Initiative: Mo Chatashali

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Abstract

The 'Mo Chatashali' education initiative addressed the digital divide among rural underprivileged children and bridged their learning gaps by adopting a local-to-local strategy. It worked effectively during the pandemic despite limited government support to provide education for needy children in the remotest areas of Odisha.

Through Mo Chatashali, Atmashakti successfully delivered an innovative remedial learning platform for children from underprivileged rural communities in Odisha during the pandemic. It helped children return to the fore of education during the covid-19 induced lockdowns and reduced potential child marriages and child labor. It also shielded them from helping with household chores, sibling care, and more. Atmashakti's 'Mo Chatashali' education initiative is more than a replicable model in emergencies like COVID-19. It is an inclusive education model in resourceless areas. It enables communities to take charge, playing a vital role in helping their children learn and thrive. Mo Chatashali is a testimony of a community-driven success story. Moreover, 'Mo Chatashali' was the sole hope to bridge the academic gap the pandemic fueled for over 0.10 million children from the tribal and Dalit communities (Kallie, 2020).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered the biggest crisis for education systems in recorded history worldwide. At the height of the pandemic, mandatory school closures due to COVID-19 affected 1.6 billion children and young people globally (The World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF, 2021). Consequently, with India's schools closed since March 2020, poor educational records have been exacerbated. According to the Odisha government data, only 2.2 of 6 million students in Odisha had access to online education. (The Indian Express & PTI, 2020).

In an ideal world, primary education would be universal and publicly financed. All children would attend school regardless of their parent's ability or willingness to pay (Arye L. Hillman, Eva Jenkner 2004, 7). However, in developing countries like India, sending children to school is one of the critical decisions parents make to improve their future. While some affluent parents send their children to private schools, in 2021, 70.3% of children in India are enrolled in government schools. This increased from 65.8% in 2020 to 64.3% in 2018 (Kritika, 2021). The main reason is that parents cannot afford the education costs of private schools.

Paused classroom and the rural-urban divide on education

During the pandemic, schools were closed to contain the spread of the Coronavirus. Initially, people hoped this humanitarian challenge would subside in a month or two. Nevertheless, as COVID-19 cases increased daily, people were forced to accept the uncertainty. The decision to shift traditional classrooms to digital platforms increased learning inequality among children and pushed many students out of school due to the digital divide. Other than learning, the absence of schooling may also have a long-lasting effect on the health and nutrition of children (Protiva & Shivani, 2020). Living in semi-urban or urban areas, children with smartphones and other digital resources somehow coped. However, most who hail from rural areas and poor economic backgrounds were pushed to the periphery of education. This occurred for several reasons, such as lack of digital devices, poor teledensity, or limited internet infrastructure. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic worsened the structural disparities between rural and urban areas and divided the students into 'haves' and 'have-nots.' This also developed feelings of self-exclusion among disadvantaged students (The Statesman, 2021).

The emergence of an alternative education platform

Due to school closures, the Odisha government attempted to cater to children's educational needs, hoping they stay connected to their studies (INEE and The Alliance, 2021). The state government introduced initiatives such as Shiksha Sampark Yojana, Live Youtube Classes, and Radio Classes to connect children with education, but they mostly failed.

According to the 2011 census, there are 47,677 inhabited villages in Odisha. Of these, 9,940 villages (20.9%) had no wireless network connection (Akash, 2019). The problem was crystal clear. If it were not addressed, learning gaps among children would exacerbate. Further, it would increase the childcare gap and exposure to violation and exploitation of children, social isolation, and much more. The children in remote rural areas were disadvantaged, with parents having little or no literacy level and no educational guidance within the family.

The education of children needed an overhaul. So, Atmashakti realized the supply gap in education and decided to become the bridge between the community's needs and the government to ensure children's access to education even during the pandemic. Enter 'Mo Chatashali' (Atmashakti 2021, 4).

The 'Mo Chatashali' model

Atmashakti Trust joined this initiative with its allies Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha (OSM) and Mahila Shramajeebi Mancha, Odisha (MSMO). Together, they developed an inclusive and alternative education model to cater to the learning needs of children. 'Mo Chatashali' was named after an Odia phrase that translates to 'my school' in English. Mo Chatashali offered remedial education by conducting in-person classes for underprivileged children who lacked access to online classes in 17 rural districts of Odisha. 'Mo Chatashali' is run, supported, and managed

entirely by the local village communities. The village committee, which is the administrative body of each village, would provide a physical space to run these centers. The COVID-19 protocol needed to maintain a physical distance of at least 1 meter between everyone to contain the spread of coronavirus. Therefore, the committee decided to keep a maximum of 10 to 15 students in a batch to ensure they could sit safely.

To understand COVID-19, how it spreads, and how we can protect ourselves, soaps, sanitizers, and safe water were arranged in Chatashalis to encourage children to practice hygiene.

The model adopted a local-to-local strategy. They appointed a youth from their community as a teacher, someone familiar with these children and the language they speak. The idea behind hiring these local youths had three fundamental reasons, including:

1. Children and communities will trust a local youth who lives with them in the same or neighboring villages and can continue teaching during the pandemic-induced lockdown. They will connect emotionally with these students as they belong to their neighboring communities.
2. Promoting mother-tongue-based learning is a non-discriminatory method of learning for tribal children. Learning gets more accessible for a child who is taught in their mother tongue (Idris Şahi, 2018). So, this strategy incorporated tribal dialects such as Santali, Ho, Koya, Munda, and Bonda ((Ministry of Education, Govt. of India, 2017, 2) as the medium of communication and textbooks provided at the Mo Chatashalis to ensure that no one is left behind.
3. The service support was more important than any other parameters. It was mostly a pro-bono service since hiring teachers-volunteers from distant places would financially burden both communities and Atmashakti. To avoid that, a local-to-local strategy was adopted to take control of the situation and give people a chance to build community resilience against challenges that come their way.

'Mo Chatashali' is an innovative education model for resource-poor areas. It can be sustained using local resources, participation, and involvement of local communities and teachers. In Odisha, the initiative included 1 lakh students of rural Odisha under its ambit (Argus News, 2022). It can produce significant positive learning outcomes among children in other areas, laying the foundation for a community-led education initiative that promotes equitable educational outcomes for all.

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