



ASHAA

TATA TRUSTS







# Tata Trusts Data Driven Governance

Dr. Poornima Dore  
Head, Data Driven Governance

Paresh Jayashree Manohar  
Akhil Rokade  
Shruti Parija  
Upendra Pallai  
Amir Ali  
Shruti Yerramilli

Joshua Mathias  
Ravi Bhushan  
Dnyanesh Renguntwar  
Sashikanta Malik  
Jitendra Dey

With a vision to “Activate Rural & Urban Governments and Associated Stakeholders to move towards a data reliant culture of decision making, and enhance the data and technology discourse in Indian Governance”, the Data Driven Governance (DDG) portfolio at the Trusts aims to strengthen rural and urban decision systems through the use of data and technology. The key objective has been to provide functional and technical support to governments for carrying out data intensive planning as a means to supplement decision making, leading to the creation of the DELTA (Data, Evaluation, Learning, Technology, and Analysis) framework.

Beginning from one Gram Panchayat in 2014, the Data Driven Governance portfolio now covers 85 districts covered in 27 states. The program has covered a population of 25 lakh through on-ground surveys with direct benefits given to 56000 households and 66000 individuals. With a prime focus to capacitate the administration DDG team has conducted a thorough training for 500+ administrative officers on utility of data and use of dashboards.







A Joint Initiative of Tata Trusts and School Education and Sports Department, Govt. of Maharashtra

# Digital Education Guarantee Card Project

First pilot project to address issues in enrollment of children of migrant sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra.



Implementing partner:

Janseva Gramin Vikas v Shikshan Pratishthan

Technical partner:

Dhwani Rural Information Systems

*A Written consent for photographing minors is been obtained from the parents and care givers by the project team.*



# Team Digital Education Guarantee Card

## Village Mobiliser

Ashwini Navnath Lokhande  
Sharad Baraku Nanaware  
Tushar Shankar Jadhav  
Naushad Mahamad Bagwan  
Santosh Jalindar Honmane  
Nitin Ramchandra Jagtap  
Vikas Popat Sawant  
Pandharinath Parvati Pawge  
Bilkis Javed Sayyad  
Ganesh Somnath Ahirekar  
Trupti Ashok Jadhav  
Jyoti Mahendra Pawar  
Snehal Rohidas Sathe  
Vaishali Ravindra Jagatap  
Kishor Uttam Nanaware  
Kanchan Nitin Gawade  
Monali Rohidas Sarak  
Rahul Sopan Shinde  
Sonali Rahul Malshikare  
Mohini Dhondiram Khunte  
Santosh Gokul Thokale  
Monika Bharat Pawar  
Sachin Dadasaheb Chavan  
Sahas Ravindra Jadhav  
Gulamhusen Gafur Shaikh  
Rupali Ganpat Bhosale  
Shamina Altap Pathan  
Rohit Sunil Borawake  
Neelam Jivraj Gaikwad  
Arpita Anil Dhumal  
Prakash Vitthal Garje  
Rajashri Sanjay Lakade  
Supriya Pramod Mohite  
Vivek Bapu Barkade  
Prashant Sanjay Tambe  
Nita Vilas Raskar  
Bhanudas Mohan Thombare

Project Director  
Nitin vasudev Narlawar

Field Manager  
Santosh Vitthal Shendkar

Psychologist  
Sameeksha Sandhya Milind

Teacher Facilitator  
Anil Dattatraya Chachar

Cluster Coordinator  
Hemant Vilas Gaikwad  
Navnath Sampat Chormale  
Azruddin Sadik Nadaf  
Akash Shridhar Sawalkar

Data Entry Operator  
Bharati Mohan Jadhav

Accountant  
Vikas Ramesh Devade



ASHAA

आमचा शिक्षण हक्क : आमचा अधिकार



Photography & Layout by  
**Wasimbarry Maner**

Asst. Layout design  
Rohit Chavan

Asst. Photography  
Tahirnakkash Maner  
Farah Khan

English translation  
Vandana Naidu-Karve

Marathi text editorial team  
Paresh Jayashree Manohar  
Sameeksha Sandhya Milind  
Wasimbarry Maner  
Santosh Shendkar  
Hemant Vilas Gaikwad  
Navnath Sampat Chormale  
Azruddin Sadik Nadaf  
Akash Shridhar Sawalkar

Published by



**DAWAAT-E-DAKKAN**  
Datta mandir road,  
Sagunamata nagar,  
Phaltan 415523  
Maharashtra, India

Printed by  
Pankaj Mudranalay, Phaltan 415523

Project by  
TATA Education Development Trust

All rights for picture and copy are reserved by Tata Trusts.



# Index



There is a Hope... Lets start walking Paresh Jayashree Manohar, Santosh Shendkar .....	i
Greetings from Education Commissioner Vishal Solanki, IAS .....	v
Tata Trusts legacy Prabhat Pani .....	vii
Addressing migration: A DDG way Dr. Poomima Dore .....	ix
Connecting the dots Shikha Srivastava .....	xi
The right spot .....	01
'Asha's' auspicious beginning .....	05
School registration extraordinaire .....	09
Reshma's school bag .....	13
Is it Saturday yet? .....	17
... and just like that, school was fun .....	21
Burnt bridges .....	25
Radhika's turn .....	29
Half Sickle .....	33
I will learn too! .....	37
The long way to go .....	41
A new tomorrow... ..	45
Working hens .....	49
War of words .....	53
Mapu .....	57
Divine visitations .....	61
Burn that sickle! .....	65
The sweet tea turned bitter... ..	69
The Sickle .....	73
Never ending fear .....	77
It's written in the signs .....	81
Constant Worrying... two stories .....	85
Look out for the harvester .....	89
Lamb to the slaughter .....	93
Our transfer .....	97

Tata Trusts held a competition, 'I, My Trusts, My Country' for the employees In 2015. They were encouraged to submit an innovative concept and if selected were given assurance of rupees thirty million for the implementation. Digital Education Guarantee card was one of the four concepts selected for the award and hence given an opportunity of implementation on ground.

The project is initiated in 2016 as a joint initiative of Tata Trusts and School Education and Sports Department of Maharashtra. Education Department played a crucial role in implementation of this project. The management of Someshwar cooperative sugar factory is an important and integral part of this project.

#### Acknowledgements

01. Hon. Sharad Pawar, Ex. Agriculture Minister, Bharat Sarkar
02. Hon. Education Minister, Maharashtra
03. Hon. Ajit Pawar, Ex. Dy CM, Maharashtra
04. Hon. Supriyatai Sule, MP, Baramati Parliamentary Constituency
05. Education Commissioner, Maharashtra
06. Sugar Commissioner, Maharashtra
07. Purushottam Jagtap, Chairman, Someshwar Co-op Sugar Factory, Someshwarnagar
08. President/Vice President Zilla Parishad, Pune
09. President/Vice President Zilla Parishad, Satara
10. CEO, Zila Parishad, Pune
11. CEO, Zila Parishad, Satara
12. District Education Officers, Pune and Satara
13. Block Education Officers, Baramati, Purandar, Khandala, Phaltan blocks
14. PRI and SMC members, community leaders and teachers in project area
15. All Migrant Workers and Children who are interested in getting educated.....



## There is a Hope... Lets Start walking...

Every year thousands of children find the life of nomads thrust upon them for six months. All of a sudden, their childhood is replaced with grown up duties and responsibilities of taking care of their house and siblings while their parents work hard in the sugarcane fields. These children are forced to exchange school for the physically strenuous hours harvesting sugarcane and transporting it to the factories for processing. The girls are kept busy cooking Bhakris and other household chores. With livestock to take care of as well, finding the time to play is a luxury none of them can afford. Sometimes, these children also take up jobs in nearby hotels or act as servers in local weddings to supplement the family's income.

When they see the local children all dressed up in their uniforms and shoes, walking to school each day, the sickle seems to weigh heavier in their hand reminding them of what they have lost. These children are familiar with rhythm, but not the rhythmic lilts of childhood poems, rather with the rhythm born of practice cutting sugarcane quickly and efficiently. They are good with math as well, but not with their multiplication tables taught in school, rather with the calculation of how much money they will earn for the sugarcane they harvested on a particular day.

Young children have to shoulder the responsibility of caring for their younger siblings. More often than not, girls from these groups don't go to school for the simple reason that they own neither mirror nor oil or comb to tidy themselves up to head out.

At the age of 12, they are eligible for half wages, which means they have to pitch in with their parents in the fields to earn a livelihood. Keenly aware of their parents never ending struggle for survival, they silence their dreams and ambitions without complaint and pitch in.

Even the smaller children spend hours on end playing with sickles as toys till they are old enough to wield it in the fields for a living. We can see this story being played and replayed every day all around us in our Maharashtra.

The sugarcane industry plays a vital role in the lives of numerous farmers in Maharashtra who depend on it as their only source of income. Today, in Maharashtra alone, there are more than 200 sugarcane factories. And most of these generational factories' survival depends on this huge network of labourers who come to work in the fields from around 15 nearby districts. Primary amongst these are Beed, Ahmednagar districts where a majority of the Talukas principally consist of these labourers. Due to the geographic conditions prevalent in these areas, around 10-12 lakh labourers migrate each year to work in the sugarcane fields. The factories work from October- April/May each year and that involves all these families moving from one village to another depending on where they are assigned to harvest the crop.

They set up camp in the outskirts of these villages and live in settlements made up of their small huts. Their day begins early at around 4 am when they head out to work and they return around 4 pm to wind down and get ready for the next day's work. Some of them leave their children with relatives before they move to the fields for the season, however most of them prefer to bring their children along. On an average, around 1-1.5 lakh children accompany their parents on this migratory journey.

Prior to the institution of the Right to Education Act, the responsibility for providing education to these children would rest on some of the sugarcane factories who ran 'Sugar Schools' to provide basic education to them. But after the decision was taken to ensure a standardised education system for all, these schools were shut down and a process was initiated to get them enrolled into the local

government run schools wherever they were located. The government also took the decision to offer boarding houses to these families when they moved to ease the problems they faced in securing a safe and secure place to live in. Sadly, poor execution of these proposals, the underlying insecurity parents felt in leaving their children in these boarding houses while they worked as well as a general antipathy from the government in implementing these ideas have resulted in leaving these policies as purely theoretical. In order to simplify the education process in the local schools for these children, the government also started the policy of issuing 'Education Promissory Notes'. However, this idea as well has not been as widely implemented as expected.

Faced with this daunting array of problems, the Tata Trusts has been tirelessly working with the sugarcane labourers children for the past three years and have been issuing 'Digital Education Guarantee Cards' to them. This ambitious initiative is a collaborative effort of the Tata Trusts and the School Education Department of Maharashtra. The initiative's primary objective is to identify the basic requirements that need to be met to ensure that they attend school.

The pilot program is being tested at the 'Someshwar Sahakari sugar factory' based in Pune's Baramati Taluka. The factory has catchment in 195 villages spread over in Baramati and Purandar blocks of Pune and Faltan and Khandala blocks of Satara District. The project team have identified 25 villages located around this factory where the labourers set up camp to work here. A survey was conducted of all the labourers at this factory and villages to identify children between the ages 0-18. Their efforts were then directed to ensuring that children aged 6-14 from that group would get admission in the local schools.

Janseva Gramin v Shikshan Pratishthan was identified as implementation partner for this project. An implementation team was

then created made up of – 35 village volunteers, 4 cluster coordinators, one psychologist, a project manager and Project Director were important part of team along with accountant and data entry operator and 1 teacher working in Zila Parishad school was deputed as a representative of the School Education department. They were tasked with creating an extensive list of children from this group who had been attending school in their villages earlier along with details of their school as well as a list of those who have never attended school or have quit citing reasons for the same.

The next step was to conduct discussions with all the schools in the nearby areas where these children would be enrolled. It is heartening to note that in the past 3 years, out of an estimated 2647 children they had on the survey records, they have been successful in getting 1864 children enrolled in school.

Next, they initiated discussions with all the schools in the neighbouring areas and prepared them to admit these children in their school systems. However, the problem is not completely solved as most of these children had an irregular attendance record.

Each day, it is the responsibility of the representatives from the implementation team to visit these settlements, collect the children, drop them in their schools and finally in the evening, return them to their respective homes. This added an additional layer of security that satisfied the parents about their children being in capable hands.

Daily surveys were conducted of the children who attended as well as those who didn't attend school.

To ensure that these children did not miss out on their studies due to frequent transfers to different harvesting sites, they also helped issue 'Education Promissory notes' that have been instituted by the Government.

Each evening the team made arrangements for reading books and playing games at the settlements where children lived. This practice went a long way in developing a trusting and friendly relationship with these children. In addition, it also gave them the opportunity to interact with both the parents and children and act as their support system to discuss any problems they were facing.

This initiative also benefitted vastly from the support of the Heads of the following departments - Education Department, Pune and Satara District's Elementary and Secondary Education Officers as well as the Baramati, Purandar, Khandala and Phaltan Taluka's education officers and the teachers from these schools.

During the implementation, it became clear that ensuring education for these migrating children could not be considered as the sole responsibility of the Education Department. Just as the saying goes – 'It takes a village to raise a child', these children need the support of the villagers as well as all the governmental departments to work together as a team to achieve this dream. Thus the concept of creating 'Migrant Friendly Village' was born. Under this concept, an action plan was created to turn these key villages into places where the migrating labourers would have all the support they need to lead a fulfilling life.

Paresh Jayashree Manohar

*Programme Manager, Data Driven Governance, Tata Trusts*

Santosh Shendkar

*Project Director, Janseva Gramin v Shikshan Pratishthan*





## Greetings from Education Commissioner

The Right to Free and Compulsory Education (2009) came into effect in Maharashtra from 1st April 2010. This act entails that it is a legal right of each child between the age of 6–14 to be included in the mainstream education and to get quality education. It is a policy under 'Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan' in which each child in the state is brought in the education mainstream and is provided quality education right from pre-primary grades up to higher secondary grades. Until and unless each child has access to quality education the task of the department of Education remains incomplete. Everybody in the educational system is conscious of this. Education department has been trying relentlessly towards solving problems faced by the migrant children/out of school children in getting education. The government resolution dated 9 January 2017 'Jalad Pragat Shaikshanik Maharashtra' has been succeeding in providing quality education to the migrant/school dropouts with the help of sensitive officials of the education department a Baalrakshak (Child protector) teachers.

The Baalrakshak (Child protector) movement in the state is gathering momentum. 28000 Baalrakshak (Child protector) teachers have voluntarily registered for this work. These teachers are working towards bringing the migrant/school dropout children into the fold of regular schooling under the aegis of Samata (Equality) section of Maharashtra state council of education research and training (Puhne). Some social organizations are working with the government for these children.

Tata Trusts has also taken initiative to work on similar questions. Digital Education Guarantee card (ASHAA) project is being jointly implemented by the Tata Trusts along with the department of education for the last three years at Someshwar Cooperative sugar

factory. It is executed by Janaseva Foundation. Cane cutting labor from 15 -16 districts of Marathwada & Vidarbha descend on this factory for work (during the season). The volunteers of this project take efforts to get the children accompanying the labour admitted to the Zilla Parishad schools in the vicinity. These efforts of theirs gets support from the government machinery.

In this way the ASHAA project has produced very good results. This attempt of conveying the problems of migrant labour and their children to the common public by writing a book about experiences of the work is certainly applaudable. My best wishes for future work.

Vishal Solanki

*IAS, Education Commissioner, Maharashtra*

*(Note - This text is translation of the original Marathi message.)*





## Tata Trusts Legacy

Tata Trusts is amongst India's oldest, non-sectarian philanthropic organisations, focussing upon multiple community development programs across India. Building on 127 years of philanthropy, Tata Trusts is exploring new ways to help India reach its great potential, and assist its most vulnerable rise onto the path of prosperity. Tata Trusts envisions that by 2021, it would have positively and sustainably impacted 100 million lives.

In realizing this vision, Tata Trusts recognize that the scale of the challenges in India exceed what any one organisation can achieve alone. Tata Trusts have, therefore, embarked on building partnerships with Foundations, philanthropists, corporates, academia and other like-minded entities, to promote maximum positive impact. One of the critical partnerships is with the government, as in India, the largest spend on social development programs is by the government and its agencies.

While remaining true to the original Charter of the Trusts, the nature of the activities undertaken by Tata Trusts in recent years has also been guided by belief of the Chairman, Mr. Ratan Tata, that the Trusts must transform to stay relevant, and to “lead” and not follow. This has led to a newer set of programs and projects, relevant to the needs of the country, including on Digital Interventions.

The Internet Saathi program has led to digital awareness reaching 25 million rural women in 2,50,000 villages in India, and is now morphing to provide digital-based livelihoods to the Saathis. The Data-driven Governance (DDG) portfolio, has focused upon a partnership with the government to push the envelope on micro-planning, and a people-participatory and data-based approach of resource allocation, project monitoring, and outcome/impact tracking.

Micro-planning in India has helped maintain a balance in “planning and development” between national priorities and local needs. The Panchayati Raj Act (73rd Amendment) and the Nagarpalika Act (74th Amendment), came into effect in 1993, and mandate the constitution of District Planning Committees to consolidate the plans prepared by rural (Gram Panchayats) and urban local bodies. Tata Trusts have facilitated the process of converting these good intentions and policy frameworks, into actual practice.

Given that micro-planning can have a significant impact upon development outcomes, it is gratifying that the DDG efforts have led to adoption of the approach by arms of the government (Niti Aayog - Transformation of Aspirational Districts program, Maharashtra Government - Village Social Transformation Foundation, and Smart Cities Mission of the Ministry of Housing and Urban affairs – Data Smart Cities program, to name a few).

The Digital Education Guarantee Card project, driven singularly by Paresh Jayashree Manohar, has operated in the intersection of DDG and Migration (another new program taken up by Tata Trusts) and provided tremendous assistance to an extremely important but neglected need of a neglected group - Continuity in Education for the children of migratory labour, a group key to the agriculture value-chain in rural India.

I am sure this wonderful project will provide inspiration to other individuals and organisations to focus upon providing similar support to other such neglected, but important sections of society.

**Prabhat Pani**

*Head, Partnerships and Technology, Tata Trusts*



## Addressing migration: A DDG way

The development discourse in India has been riddled by varying approaches to migration. On one hand there is the view that migration is symptomatic of agrarian distress and that such movement is exploitative and disruptive and hence must be stopped. The other view is that migration is good, it leads to free movement of people in search of economic and other opportunities and a broadening of the resource base and purchasing power back home. Somewhere in the middle lies one undeniable truth-that good or bad, easy or difficult, migration is definitely a reality. It is a way of life for more than 100 million migrant workers in our country, as per the Economic Survey of India 2016-17, a large part of it being seasonal or circular migration. And this pattern has persisted for several years. It is high time we plan for it, rather than wishing it away.

This is the power of data – to bring perspective to any debate; to give a sense of the size, complexity and duration of an issue at hand. And to help us assess variations across regions and time periods. How has the occupational profile of individuals changed over the years? Has the concentration in construction work gone up and if yes, what has it meant for women participation in the workforce? Which locations have seen a proliferation of what kind of employment? Data also has the ability to call out what we do not know. For instance, in India we do not know a lot about migration for periods less than 6 months, because the Census and the NSSO do not ask those questions. And very often there are many data points that official surveys do capture, but are not released in time or at a level of granularity where local administration can take requisite action. Similarly, companies, civil society or academia are limited by this unavailability of data which is essential to plan any strategy, intervention or even organize research. So the first step for everybody is to undertake a local profiling or tracking exercise, whether it for delivery of a government program or setting up a factory, or even doing a local field study.

The Trusts efforts on Data Driven Governance seek to address this gap by providing directed technology and capacity building support to rural and urban decision makers. The focus is to inculcate a data culture into the process of government planning and service delivery – thereby creating significant impact for underserved and marginalized communities. It has been an interesting journey and hugely satisfying to see the energy brought in by district collectors, municipal commissioners. Members of parliament as well as state level departmental authorities to absorb and support such ideas.

Through this particular project, our effort is to underscore the strength of data to converge varied sectors to arrive at technology driven solutions. This project is an outcome of a call for ideas “I, myself and my Trusts” floated by the Trusts a few years ago. My compliments to Paresh Jayashree Manohar and the entire field team for taking this from concept to execution. The core idea is this: certain specific work streams like construction, brick kiln and sugarcane workers experience family migration, the children being an important part of the shift. Baramati is one such sugarcane belt with several sugarcane factories employing migrant labour. Most of the children in transit get left out of school or get drawn into the informal sector at a very early age. Hence digital tracking of these migrant children has been developed as an important tool to enable them to stay in school and access the education guaranteed to them by law, while also helping villagers to evolve into migrant friendly villages. I would like to thank the migration and education teams at the Tata Trusts for their organic support in what has evolved into a truly multi-thematic intervention. I am hopeful that efforts like these will drive act as models for convergence not only within philanthropic space, but also within government, so that technology and data oriented approaches can be used for problem solving across departments and teams.

Dr. Poornima Dore

*Head, Data Driven Governance, Tata Trusts*



## Connecting the dots

Migration is a reality in today's world, with a large section of the population on the move usually in search of livelihood opportunities. As per GMR (2019), globally 763 million people live outside their place of origin. In India, the last census put the number of migrants at 454 million. Migrants especially seasonal migrants form the bulk of the informal labour force in the country. These migrants suffer from occupational, social and residential vulnerabilities. Seasonal migrant families usually move as an unit with parents reluctant to leave children behind, even if it means depriving them of educational opportunities available at their homes. As children move with their families, their education, health, nutrition, in general their entire growth is adversely impacted. This creates handicaps for their entire life. Several studies have shown that children who remain out of school fall in the 'hardest to reach' or 'most vulnerable' categories as they face linguistic, social and procedural barriers.

Tata Trusts has been working with internal migrants for more than a decade in high migration prone source areas and related destinations. The Trusts interventions under its migration portfolio have focused on addressing vulnerabilities of migrants through building self reliant service delivery centres that link migrants and their families to entitlements, financial services and legal counseling. At the destination, in construction sites and brick kilns interventions focus is also on early childhood care and education.

The Digital Education Guarantee card initiative for children of migrant sugarcane workers in Maharashtra is commendable in seeking to put spotlight on a section of our young population that are denied access to educational opportunities merely due to change in location from one region of the country to another. The holistic approach adopted in the project from firstly collecting data on migrant children in the area to providing continuous handholding

support to migrant families for the child's retention in school is worthy of emulation. The benefits are two fold as it gets the child back in the formal education system as well at a reduced risk of being drafted into the labour force at a young age. It is an investment in and a passport to a better future for a young child and his family.

My gratitude to the Department of Primary Education, Government of Maharashtra, for their support.

Compliments and Kudos to my colleagues in the DDG team of Tata Trusts.

Shikha Srivastava

*Head, Urban Habitat and Migration, Tata Trusts*





## The right spot

Santosh was unable to sleep. Whirring wheels echoed his churning thoughts and he couldn't relax. The drought had wreaked havoc in the farmers' lives again. So, all the villagers had decided to go back to the sugarcane fields. They were lucky to land a contract with a good factory this year, but he was worried about finding the right spot to set up camp. He prayed it would be the same place as last year. That one was perfect!

Loading all their belongings and families on their carts, the group travelled through the night towards the Western Maharashtra fields. What if another group got to their spot first? That would make matters difficult. Where would they find electricity? And water? What to do about ....

The mounting questions made him nervous. Their belongings were stuffed into every possible corner of the small trailer and Santosh squirmed to fit into whatever space he could find to try and find sleep. The animals in the other trailer weren't having an easy time settling in either.

Dawn broke as they reached the factory and luck was on their side. It was the same spot as last year!

The menfolk started setting up their huts in their usual spaces from last time. While the women started collecting water and cooking their Bhakris for the day.

The bullocks were tired, hungry and stiff from their long



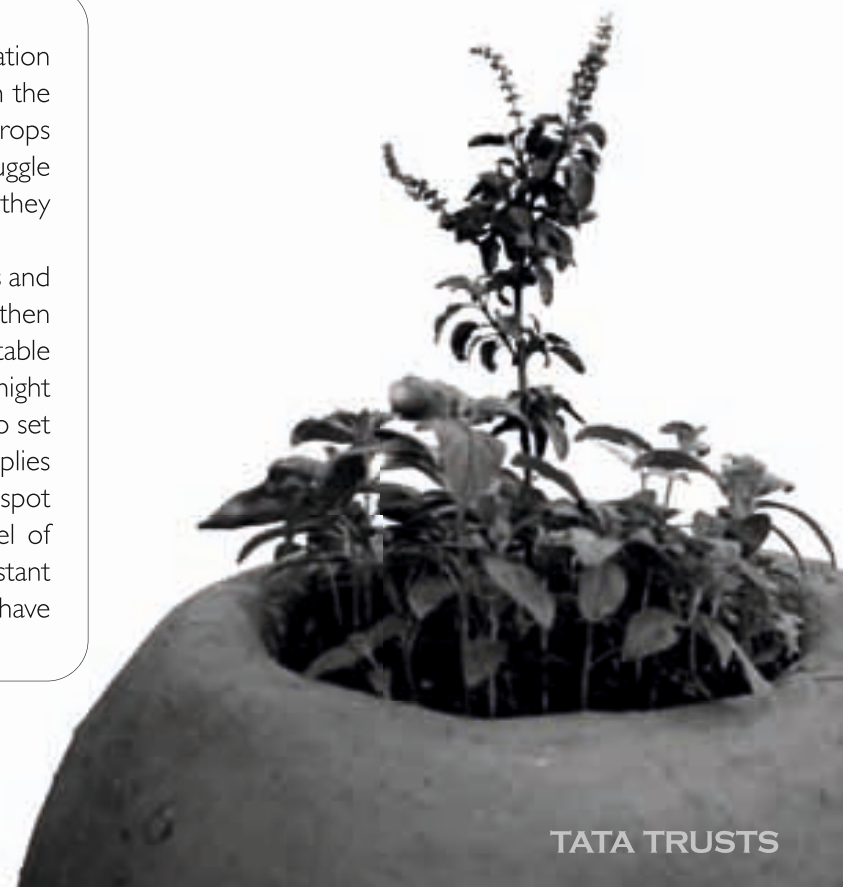
journey. It took a while to unshackle them. Santosh picked up the bundles of hay to feed them. Unable to find the axe, he started tearing it up by hand. They attacked their food eagerly and gulped down buckets of water to wash it down. By the time everyone in the group had finished eating, the sun was well overhead.

Exhausted man and beast settled down in the sun to rest. The lack of shade didn't bother any of them and sleep soon took over all of them under the blazing sun. No one could expect such a luxurious break for the next 6 months.

#### Insecurity

Migrating workers have no say in selecting the location where they have to set up camp. That decision lies in the hands of the factory and where their transporter drops them off. A bad spot translates into a tremendous struggle for potable water. If there are no power lines nearby, they are unable to get electricity either by pulling lines.

It all depends on which plot of land the factory assigns and where the transport drives them to. If it's a good spot then that's great, if not there is a tremendous struggle for potable water. Even if they tried to get electricity, the poles might not be nearby. A high rocky spot is always preferred to set up camp as the alternative could mean their basic supplies are washed away by unseasonal, heavy rains. Further, a spot far away from the village could result in a high level of robberies when they work in the fields as well as a constant fear for the safety of their daughters. As a result, boys have to guard the huts in the day by skipping school.







## 'Asha's' auspicious beginning

The melodious ringing of bells adorning the bullocks, music blaring from the tractor, hustle and bustle of the settlement, lighted cooking stoves- everything heralded the engaged atmosphere in the second year of 'Asha'- our initiative's implementation. We were geared up and ready to handle the migrant workers who had arrived in Padegoan. This incident took place during our surveying there.

Laborers started working early in the fields and would return home only past 7 pm. So, we had to start our survey after that time to get our questions answered. While in 'Nevse vasti' we came across the hut of the family in question.

Per routine, we started with our normal question- 'Which village are you from?'

To which came the prompt reply 'Chaligaon, District Jalgaon.'

We were impressed with the quick response. Before we could ask him his name, he invited us to join him for dinner. We politely refused but Mohini Madane, our team member requested him to answer our questions while he ate. Without resorting to abuses we would have normally faced for disturbing someone during mealtimes, he politely gave us what we needed. It was truly commendable.

We asked Anil Sonawane about his family and children. He



replied that he'd just been married for 1.5 years and his daughter was just 2 months old. We asked him for her name. Husband and wife looked at each other without answer. 'We haven't named her yet,' they said.

'But we need her name for the survey!' I said.

'What's the name of your family deity?'

'Yallama,' replied the wife. Her husband rejected that name.

Mohini said, 'She's your first child, surely you have some expectations (*Asha*) about her future.'

Anil liked the name 'Asha' and so did his wife. Mohini continued, 'Our endeavour 'Asha' is to ensure the right of education to all children.'

And thus 'Asha Anil Sonawane' had her naming ceremony with all of us wishing her a bright future.

#### ASHAA Survey

collects the basic information of all sugarcane laborers - Origin village, district, financial status, family members and the names, photos, age and school attendance of their children. We also collect reasons for non-attendance. Local school registration for these transitional children is also completed then.





## School registration extraordinaire

Rani, 13, female, with short cropped hair and a longish face sat there dressed in a cream blouse and red skirt. She was there after much persuasion by Kanchan and Sonali, the local village mobiliser. However, she was there with a two year old child in her arms. The family who brought her to take care of their child weren't interested in her education. They finally wrangled permission for this one day for her to attend the annual school registration event. Terrified, quiet, she sat there with her young charge - in the principal's office. Rare smiles sometimes showed her interest in the event.

Our preparations were on full steam to make the second year of the registration a success. It was a well attended event. Everyone from senior villagers, school authorities, people who physically and virtually helped the initiative came in full force. It was a special day when we distributed school supplies collected through community effort- bags, clothes etc. to the students. It was a special platform to inform people about the Right to Education.

The village mobiliser try their best to enroll the maximum number of students on this day. Children eagerly awaited the chance to get something new of their own.

In some places, the village elders distributed it while in others- the local children gave it out to the transitional kids. This was seen as a way to foster affinity and affection





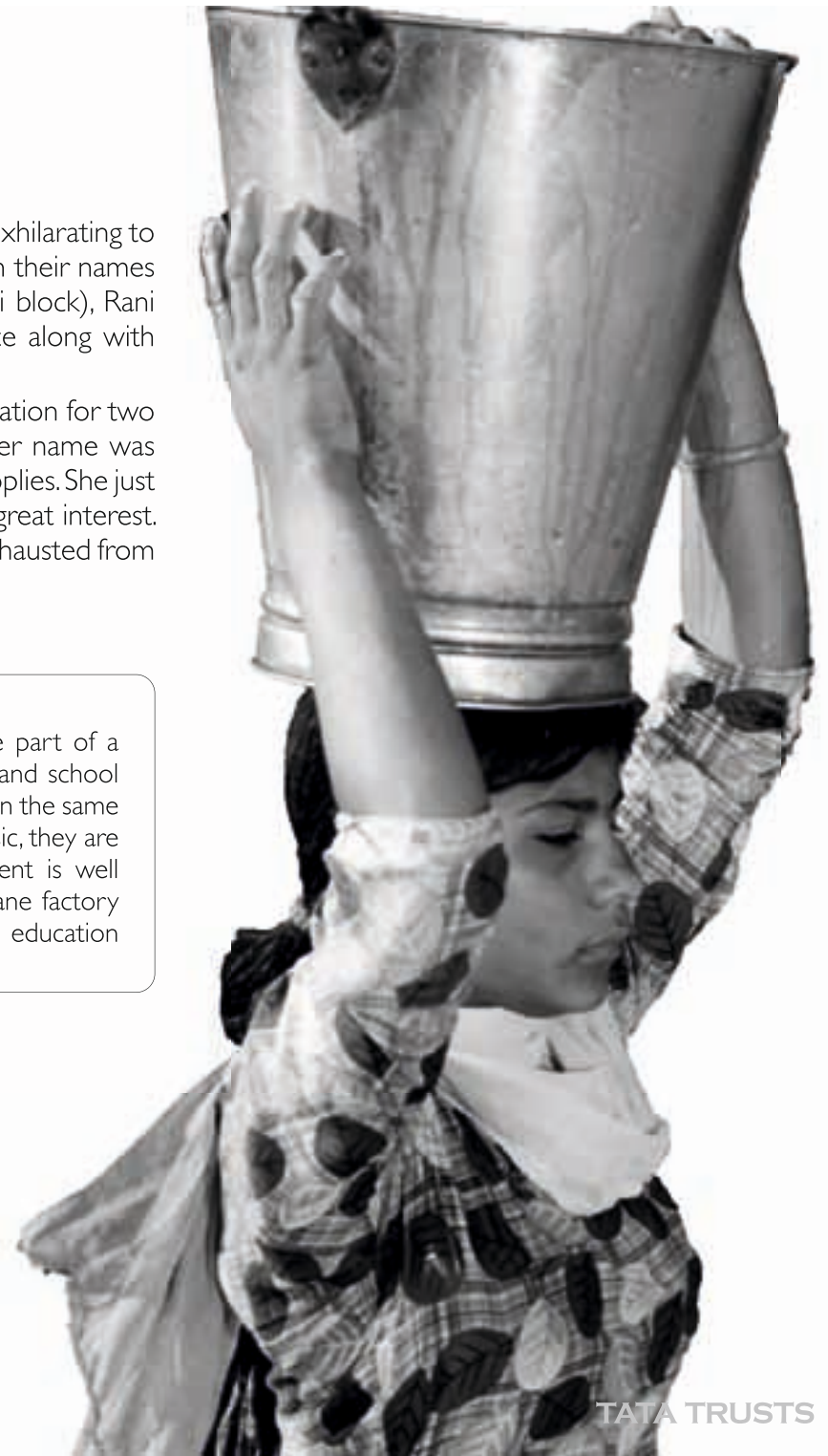
between these two groups of children. It was exhilarating to see the children get into a nervous tizzy when their names were called out. In Korhale Budruk (Baramati block), Rani waited to be inducted in the principal's office along with some other girls.

Rani joined in this group along with the registration for two other schools. She looked tired. Even after her name was called out, she refused to go and collect her supplies. She just sat there watching the entire ceremony with great interest. The small child had fallen asleep in her arms, exhausted from the long day.

That was the last time, Rani was seen in school.

#### Welcome ceremony

On the first day of school, new enrolees are part of a parade and they are welcomed with flowers and school supplies. Migrating children are also welcomed in the same way. In some places, accompanied by lively music, they are even driven around in bullock carts. The event is well attended by local government officials, sugarcane factory representatives as well as school board and education department representatives.





## Reshma's school bag

The fires stoking the boilers in West Maharashtra's sugarcane factory effectively turned the dreams of children's education in Marathwada to cinders. Ninth grader Reshma took her school bag and sat outside her settlement. Her family had moved to the fields for the season. Since it was unthinkable to leave an impressionable, young girl alone, they had brought her along. Her brother, enjoying the gender advantage, was left at a hostel to study.

Village mobiliser tried to convince her parents to send her to school. Regular meetings didn't help and the excuses abounded. Sometimes it was their poverty and other times - the fear of sexual assault. But Reshma stayed hopeful. Passing days increased her despondency. One day, the project manager and his team cornered the parents to force a decision. They agreed to send her after the upcoming religious festival, Sankranti- which heralded the new year.

The promised day came and went without school. They objected again- who'd work in the fields and finish household chores? They were justified too. They were subsisting on a single wage. How could they afford it?

One day, Reshma lost her temper. 'You sent my brother to school and got me here to work. You don't value me.'

The parents were struck speechless.

Now the season is over. In 2 months time, the sugarcane







harvesting would be done. The rainy season would bring its own problems. Factories will shut down and the labourers will return home for a while. Everyone will wait for October-November when the circle will start anew. Factories will stoke the boilers again but by then Reshma's dream of education would have turned to ashes.

#### Education Guarantee Card

In order to streamline education for girls like Reshma, a bold new initiative has been instituted- the practice of issuing an Education Guarantee Card.

Per this venture, originating schools will issue a progress report to such transitional children's parents. The incredibly important and influential project's execution needs a lot of improvement. The 'ASHAA project' promises to issue such report cards to all children from now on.





Is it Saturday yet?

Ajay (age 10), a smart 4th grader from Devgaon attended school regularly in his village. The drought forced his farmer parents to work in the sugarcane fields.

This year, we'd decided on a new plan to boost school enrollment. We'd get friendly with the children first with games etc. and then encourage admissions. From day one, Ajay was our star performer. He was the best in every game- from tag to 'lagori'. It got so that if he didn't come, the other children weren't interested either.

A few days later, we started enrolling children. While chatting, Ajay's mom told us about his dream to become a police officer and how much he loved dressing up as Singham. However, circumstances wouldn't let him join school.

'Why not? He's very smart and will do very well.' I reiterated.

'He's my oldest and takes care of my 2 ½ year old girl and 6-month-old twin brothers. Granny can't take care of three children! I take one of the babies with me to the fields every day and leave the other at home. He cooks and feeds them. If I'm late, he mixes flour with water and feeds the baby. He's such a big help to me and cares for his siblings.'

One day I took him to school, but as expected, Granny came there and dragged him away beating him for neglecting his duties.

It was a catch 22 situation with no solution in sight.



After much deliberation, we suggested that he could attend the ½ day sessions on Saturdays. They agreed and Ajay's happiness is plain to see. Every time he sees me as I pick up the other kids he asks eagerly, 'Is it Saturday yet?'

#### Aspirations?

When everyone around the world is dreaming of high quality lifestyle. Every other child is talking of career in medicines, engineering like high paid jobs. Few are talking passions like arts, music and theatre. And you come to the migrant children, with inadequate exposure, absence of any positive support and proximity to sickle and harsh ground realities most of their faces are blank when asked about their aspirations. Yes thanks to the suppression every other child wants be a labor contractor or a police.







...and just like that, school was fun

I reached the settlement and started urging the children to get ready for school.

The last hut I got to was Sapna's. There I saw Ashwini Rathod playing. I asked her if she wanted to join us, but she refused.

I told her about all the fun and games the children enjoyed.

'We even feed them', I said. But she wasn't impressed.

So, I left urging her to at least join in the evening activities. She gave her consent to coming in that evening and then I left with the others.

On the way, I asked Sapna if Ashwini had ever attended school. She told me that Ashwini had tried it for 2-3 days and not returned. She seemed to prefer spending all her time at the hut.

However, she started attending the evening activities regularly. She would even help me get all the other children together and we got to know each other well.

After a few days, I again suggested she come to school and she agreed.

But she insisted that I sit with her in class. I explained that she would have a teacher who would be there all the time. But she was adamant. Either I stayed with her or she would not go. So, I agreed. We reached her class and after she was seated, I told her I would be back after I finished running a few errands.



In the evening, when I returned to pick up the children, she came running to me. 'Why did you not come back? I waited forever.'

I replied that my errands took me longer than expected and asked her about her day. She told me that the teacher asked her name and they played tag in the afternoon.

'Look how much fun that was! You can play tag again with your new friends tomorrow.'

Now she's already in school by the time I get there to collect the others.

#### Activities

Getting children into school is not as easy as just picking them up and dropping them there. First, the children have to be attracted by stories and the village mobiliser take the effort to make friends with them. To make this easy, the members are trained in conducting activities that will get children interested – art work, games, songs etc. It's through such fun and games that they get closer to the children and get them interested in joining school.









## Burnt bridges

Sanket, Nitin and Sachin- were children of sugarcane laborers in Pawarvasti. They had quit school permanently and worked in the fields like their parents and spent their free time catching fish in the river.

We tried hard to get them to school and even gave them cycles as incentives, but it was too late. They had accepted farm work as their life and some habits are hard to break.

Normally, at this age, adolescent children benefit from counselling to help them understand their physical and emotional changes. They can also access safe places to discuss such feelings openly and get useful advice.

But migrant children already burdened with household responsibilities had no such avenues. It seemed next to impossible for these boys to find a safe outlet to satisfy their inner curiosity when everyone was driven more by the basic needs of survival.

It was a quiet, peaceful afternoon when I saw them at the river. They were whiling the time away catching fish with their torn nets as usual.

I couldn't stop myself from scolding Nitin, 'You could go to school instead of wasting time here!'

“Sir, I don't like school,” was the curt reply.

He regretted his bluntness immediately after I fell quiet and said, 'Sir, would you like some fried fish for dinner?'



'Don't you want any?' I asked.  
'We don't eat fish on Saturday.'  
'Then why did you catch them?'

They stood there silently looking at each other. Suddenly, I realized what was going on. Having burnt their bridges to education and interaction with peers, where else would migrants find the quiet and personal space to discuss their inner thoughts?

#### Counselling support

Adolescents deal with questions beyond those related to education. This is more serious for migrants who must also cope with moving every 15 days. The antagonism they face at school, lack of friends, inability to catch up with school syllabus - can get intimidating. Our initiative aims at addressing these issues as well.





## Radhika's turn

In the 1st week of November, a large group of laborers had come in to work from Vidarbha-Marathwada. Slowly, the factory's chimney swung into action and as their work picked up pace so did our survey activities.

In my initial surveys, I came across Radhika, a 7th grader interested in school. She was registered in the 6-14 age group.

As I made my final notes, I met her mother and noted the family information. I requested her to send Radhika to school. But her mother said, 'I'm in my 7th month of pregnancy. Who'll go with my husband to cut sugarcane? I can't do all the work alone. If my daughter doesn't help me, who will?' I had no reply.

Tender, innocent, 13-year-old Radhika would go with her father to the fields. But try as we might, none of us could solve Radhika's problems. Seeing me take the other children to school, she would always get upset.

Although her mother wanted to send her, she was helpless too. As the oldest of 4 girls, she had a lot of responsibilities. Her mother was hoping for a son this 5th time and Radhika's schooling depended on the gender of her expected sibling.

I asked her mother if she could at least spare her for the evening activities. And on the days when the factory has a lay off, she could attend school as well. After weeks of





negotiations, they agreed. After 2 ½ months, Radhika's mother went into labor. It was quite difficult, and she had to stay in the ICU for 2 days. We arranged for help from the 'Asha' social workers for them.

But 5th time-it was a girl again. Radhika could no longer attend school or even the activities. Working in the fields and taking care of her siblings took up all her time.

One hopes that maybe she'll be able to attend school next year. But that is only considering her parents felt the 6th sibling would be a boy??

#### Lay off

In case the factory has more sugarcane available than its capacity to process, laborers are given time off in batches. In reality, laborers are expected to work without a break for the entire 6 months duration. They can't afford to do it and taking any time off is only out of some serious compulsion.

The children are however very happy with the enforced time off for their parents. One of the reasons being, they can attend school on such days.







## Half Sickle

It was October. The laborers set up camp and we started our survey. During the surveys, we met Bharat Gawli's family. We met his family members- his wife, 8th grader Nitin and 6th grader Ashwini.

As we discussed school for the children, Bharat retorted, 'I'm a half sickle as is (half wages). My wife is too weak to work. I can't run the household on my single wage. They won't join school!'

Days of discussions finally resulted in Ashwini joining school while Nitin took up work at a local restaurant. We really wanted him to study as well. So, we threatened the hotel owner with a child labor violation lawsuit. Scared, he fired Nitin.

The next day, when we got there, Bharat accosted us, drunk and angry. 'You're forcing your will on us! Either Nitin gets his job back or I take Ashwini to work in the fields. Should we starve in the name of education? Should I care for my family on half wages or clear my loans? Everyone wants the best for their children, but you're not understanding my side of the story!'

We felt very bad but realized that at least getting Ashwini to school was better than neither of them. Now, every day, Ashwini finishes her chores and attends school without fail. While Nitin goes to work in the restaurant without fail.





#### Half sickle

A worker's wages depend on the number of sickles working. If a pair works together, that counts as a whole wage. A single worker means  $\frac{1}{2}$  a sickle and  $\frac{1}{2}$  wages. Each year, the workers take an advance from their contractors. At the end of season, the accounts are balanced against the number of sugarcane they've harvested. Inevitably, their advances are never cleared out and each year that follows is spent working off the earlier amount along with the new loans taken for the current year.





I will learn too!

The night air was charged with our enthusiastic singing. The hard day's labors forgotten for a while, all the women, who were initially mouthing the words, looked ready to sing their way to dawn.

The cheerful folk songs and long forgotten melodies were the perfect cover for our unobtrusive questions whether they knew how to read and write, or if any of their children attended school and more importantly the number of children there and if they will go to school.

There was an old lady watching us who did not seem inclined to join in.

When we tried to include her, she retorted, 'Please sing to your heart's content in your home. All this talk of education! What's in it for me? Me and my broken bones from old age and the rest of me wasting away cutting sugarcane! Here you are talking of teaching me!' She told the other women sitting there, 'Don't listen to them. You will spend your time studying and in the meantime the factories will cut Rs. 4 from your pay for the time lost. Who's going to be sorry then?'

One of the women there tried to convince her that no one would lose money. The next day, we went to her hut and started chatting. As she got the tea ready, we started talking about her village, how long she'd been working, her family and children etc. She interrogated me as well about - my







hometown, salary, the reasons why I did this work.

Then I told her about the 'Asha' initiative and spoke at length about the need to educate children. I urged her to send her granddaughter to school as well.

From that day on, the feisty lady would go around the settlement encouraging people to send their children to school.

#### Adult literacy classes

In the first year of our initiative, while we tried to enroll the children, we found ourselves interacting with their mothers quite frequently. In order to increase their participation in these efforts, we came up with the idea of starting adult literacy classes. The Pune Metro Rotary club and the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samuday helped us achieve this goal. Over time, we've found an increased number of girls enrolling in school thanks to this effort.





## The long way to go

'Come here Radha,' her sister shouted bubbling over with anger like the tea on the stove. Radha walked over hesitantly with the baby in her arms.

'Where had you gone?', she screamed as she whipped her with the cane. Radha sat in a nearby hut crying over her wounds. Radha's sister had got her there to take care of her baby. The other children attended school, but no amount of persuasion could convince Radha's sister to let her attend.

However, Radha's desire to attend school wouldn't be dampened. Radha suggested, perhaps she could attend school with the baby after her sister left for the fields. I agreed and Radha rushed to school after completing her chores.

Unfortunately, on that day, she got late playing and returned past 6 pm. By then, her sister was already there furiously looking for her. Just then she spotted Radha walking towards her with the baby and her books and she got a trashing.

When I visited the settlement in the evening, Radha came to me weeping and returned her books.

'I cannot come to school from now. My sister has asked me to return these to you.'

I tried talking to her sister. 'The teacher doesn't mind if she brings the baby along, so why should it worry you?' There was no response.

I told Radha, 'Hang on to the books, I will teach you right



here.'

So, we started studying in her hut, but she couldn't let go of her dream to attend school. Today when I went to pick the others, she called out to me 'Mam, I want to come as well.'

Seeing her eagerness, I asked her to get ready to leave. On the way she kept looking around scared in case her sister spotted her.

I pacified her saying school would end early that day and she could be back before her sister. She requested me talk to the others and warn them about not tattling on her.

I spoke to them, 'Just as you want to attend school, Radha feels the same. So, I request all of you to keep her secret.' All the children agreed and so began Radha's journey to being educated.

#### Caring for siblings

When the laborers migrate, they bring children older than 8-10 to work at the factory. Their main responsibility is to care for their younger siblings because the laborers have to work in the field in all weathers with no time off. 18-19 % CHILDREN can't attend school due to this reason.









A new tomorrow...

'Madam, with a 3-year-old girl and a 2-year-old son tied to my back- I can't cut sugarcane.

I'll think about school when we go home.' So, saying, Renuka's mother nudged me on.

They were part of a new group of around 10-15 families who had come in from Bajrangwadi and had set up camp in the cool shade of the tamarind trees near the well. I was trying to get Renuka enrolled in school but like her mother said, she needed help with her babies. With the hissing of Bhakris on the hot stove, I started back after the survey.

Deep in my thoughts, I suddenly heard running feet and someone calling out to me- 'Didi'. I turned to see Renuka trying to catch up. She took a few minutes to catch her breath and said 'I used to attend school in my village. Why don't you give me the books and I can read it right here and finish all my studies!'

I was overjoyed. We became good friends as she would finish 3-4 books in a day. In the evenings, she'd read picture books aloud to her parents and siblings. Even children from the neighboring settlement- Ajay, Rajveer, Pavan had started to read story books.

A few days later, the group started returning home later than usual. Their supervisor told me they needed to travel further than usual so there won't be any evening reading activities.



It was the same the next day. I waited as long as I could, to no avail. I couldn't reach their supervisor either.

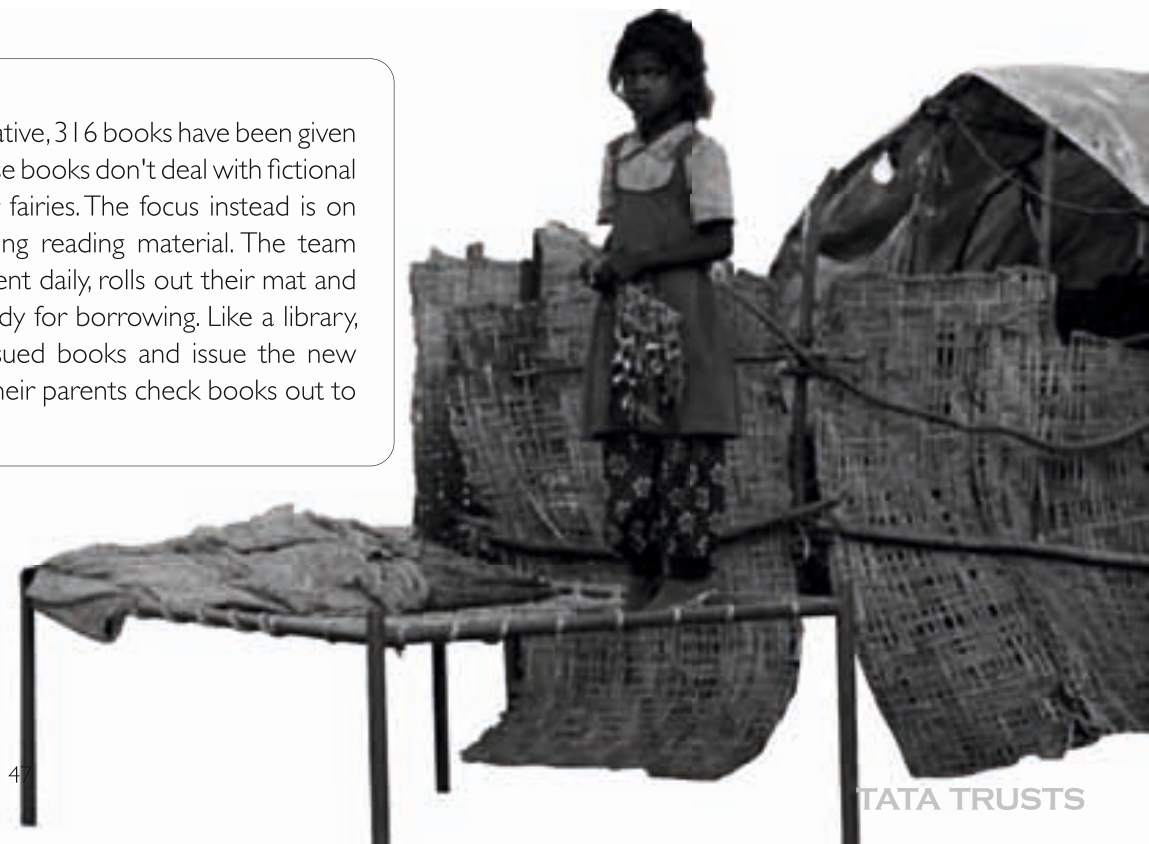
The third day I decided to wait as long as it took to meet Renuka. Luckily as soon as I got there, I saw her running towards me.

'We've been late for the past 2 days. You need to give me at least 4 books till next time!'

As her mother cooked the evening Bhakris, and I sat on the mat enjoying the cool breeze late in the night, Renuka's mother told me about how anxious Renuka had been for new books. 'Just before you came in, she was imagining how great it would be if you were to come in with something new to read...'

#### Book cart

As part of the ASHAA initiative, 316 books have been given to each team member. These books don't deal with fictional tales of violence, magic or fairies. The focus instead is on providing thought provoking reading material. The team member visits the settlement daily, rolls out their mat and places the books on it ready for borrowing. Like a library, they collect the earlier issued books and issue the new ones. Several times even their parents check books out to read.





## Working hens

I had just completed newcomers Radha and Deepak's survey form and offered to take their children to school from tomorrow.

But their father Prakash Jadhav objected, 'If the children go to school, where would the hens go?' Two days of heated discussions still didn't change his mind. So, I decided to convince their mother instead.

Our efforts were rewarded when she finally agreed to send one of them. The next day, I explained to Radha and Deepak 'I want to take you both but one of you has to stay back to care for the hens. So, let's do this. Today I'll take one of you while the other stays back and tomorrow we'll switch.'

Radha immediately said, 'I'll go today.' Seeing her leave, Deepak said, 'I'm not staying back. I want to go too.'

I persuaded Deepak, 'Tomorrow will be more fun. So, let me take her today.'

Pacified, he calmed down and we left. In the evening when I got the children back, Deepak reminded me of my promise 'It's my turn tomorrow, not hers! Don't forget.'

In the evening light of the stove fire, as her mom cooked Bhakris, Radha told everyone in the settlement about her first day. She even read a story to her parents.

I told Radha's mom, 'Doesn't she look happy? You should send Deepak too. Let them get the chance that you never





had.'

'I understand. But just the two of us can't feed and care for the whole family.'

I had no reply. When I got there the next day to pick the children, both Deepak and Radha ran up to me. Radha said, 'Madam, both of us are coming to school.'

'But who's going to take care of the hens today?', I asked.

Deepak happily told me that their mom had bundled the hens into a basket and taken them to the fields.

#### Livestock

When laborers migrate, they move with their horses, cows, bullocks, goats etc. as well. As the grown-ups have to work all day, caring for them become the children's responsibility. As their wages don't really suffice in sustaining their families, this additional source of income is also very important. But all of this means that children have to skip school to take care of these livestock.





## War of words

I confronted Akash and Mahadev who had exchanged their books for serving spoons at the local marriage hall.

'Why did you skip school yesterday?',

'We were visiting relatives in Baramati', they replied hesitantly.

'Visiting relatives or serving food? Where were you working this time?' I questioned angrily.

Their silence spoke volumes prompting me to call a local contractor.

He answered with a barrage of abuses. 'How dare you call me? Stay out!'

That confirmed my doubts, he had hired them.

'Why deny these children education?'

More abuses and threats followed for the next few minutes.

We decided to negotiate further with a local mediator. But when he saw us, he started again 'How dare you...'.

He didn't spare my friend either.

'Do you have any normal words in your vocabulary, 'my friend asked frustrated.

He curtly replied, 'I curse whoever I please.'

I shared the incident with my colleagues. My intrepid project leader was a seasoned reporter!

He called the contractor and started, 'Local news reporter





calling for your comments on the latest developing story. We've heard the recording and the abusive language you used. Would you like to share a statement we can print in your defense?'

He panicked. 'What's a few words between friends?'

'So you abuse your friends normally? Is the work you are getting the children into even legal? Do you realize how much trouble you could be in with the law? You could go to jail!'

We had him begging for forgiveness in no time at all.

'Don't mess with their education! Let them go to school,' he concluded.

*Contractors like him stop kids on their way home regularly. And before you know it, books are exchanged for sickles. Today's students become tomorrow's laborers.*

#### A multi-level dialogue

This unique initiative for geographically displaced children's education needs a continuous dialogue with all the stakeholders involved to move forward - Manufacturers, education departmental heads, bureaucrats, labor representatives, teachers, village elders, children, reporters, social organizations etc. That is the only way we can keep the momentum going.







## Mapu

The school children huddled around terrified as they walked slowly holding hands. The others followed guarding the rear.

Questions like - 'Is she here?'

'Do you see her?'

'Look around, where could she be?' peppered the silence.

'If we get caught, we're doomed', one child intoned seriously.

Who were they scared of? A drunkard? Some angry parent?

Or a vengeful spirit?

Actually, they feared Mapu, a 9-year-old girl who had never gone to school and had made it her mission to prevent others from doing so.

We tried to understand her reasons and after much research found out it was a case of 'If I can't- neither can you!'

She didn't stop at standing in their way. She would also threaten them with stones and when that didn't work, she took a knife. The kids were afraid of her as they would of a monster.

The local teachers had adopted an attitude of 'You go your way and we'll go ours' with her. But she wasn't happy with that either.

When she saw the school children playing, she would get angry and spend her time and energy disrupting their games- throwing mud on them, turning their playground into a





puddle etc. Her innovative spirit in making them miserable knew no bounds.

However, she got bored of being alone in the settlement with her brother thanks to her behavior. For a while, she sulked around fearless, watching them play. And just like that, there she was, a part of their games as if it was the most normal thing.

The story doesn't end here. One day she suddenly turned up in school. Her grand entrance was equally extraordinary. Schoolbag in one hand, she jumped over the wall and joined the class and then left the same way. Her leap across boundaries she had set for herself, did more than bring joy to all of us and the happiest of all was Santosh – the ASHAA team member.

#### Aggressiveness

75% of the children hail from backward communities who have never received basic education. Used to wandering around, this makes it difficult for them to settle down in a single place to study. These children face tremendous pressure to conform to their new school atmosphere and expectations. This pressure comes out in some cases as excessive aggressiveness while in others it's reflected in complete reclusiveness. Mapu, came from such a community. However, her aggressiveness reduced drastically once she started interacting with other children.





## Divine visitations

A son was born after five sisters. First impressions indicated that the precious heir would enjoy love and a blessed life. His unfortunate sisters could only expect a life full of hardship. But a happy story in the world of the beleaguered sugarcane workers would be an anomaly.

It was brought to our attention that Raj's hair was too long. His parents countered, 'He's visited by Bhilarbaba (local deity). We can't cut it.'

We protested- 'He can't see the board. It covers his face.' We were ignored.

Finally, the social workers took matters in their own hands and got him a haircut. Two days later, Raj fell ill while in the fields.

'He needs a doctor,' we said.

To which came the reply, 'He needs God, not doctors. Tonight, when Bhilarbaba visits him, we'll seek his advice.'

'At least send him to school.' we requested to no avail.

'What if he's visited by God when we aren't there?', they objected.

School should be the main part of the daily routine of any child. But Raj's mornings were centered around his deity. Mornings were spent worshipping Bhilarbaba and evenings in answering people's questions when Bhilarbaba 'visited'.

In a patriarchal society, where the male heir enjoys





unrestricted rights and freedom, it's truly ironic that Raj was destined for a life more ill-fated than his sisters.

Twenty years down the line, we might see him plying his fortune-telling trade under some tree. Ignorant people will seek answers in exchange for chicken and liquor. That ill-informed boy will dole out advice based on his twisted understanding of life.

Every day, such holy men and women push society further into the depths of ignorance. Innocent children are made to continue these practices thus ensuring that the circle remains unbroken. The undisputed tragedy is that the lamps that brighten the prayer rooms in their huts do little to drive away the darkness that surrounds it.

#### Blind faith

75% of the sugarcane labourers are part of the deprived and backward communities in India. Lack of education for the past several generations, make them most susceptible to superstitions and God men. In the absences of good public health services around, they are bound to have more faith in prayers to cure their children and don't trust hospitals for maternal care. Belief in injuries caused by evil spirits, possession by evil spirits etc. is quite common. In addition, they feel it's important to have a male heir which leads to a larger family size to sustain.





Burn that sickle!

The shrill ringtone woke me at 5 am. The voice at the other end urged me to get to the field as soon as possible as a boy's hand was broken.

'Whose? Where?' Splashing through muddy fields, I weaved my way through the standing crops. I saw a group of people circled around someone in that dark field. My cell torch showed me Anil Malche's thumb gushing blood and a handkerchief drenched in it!

Third grader Anil's mom was wailing uncontrollably. She begged me to help. I consoled her and carried him to my motorcycle. With his father, Bhausingh Malche, next to him in the backseat, we rushed to the health sub centre. After one look, the nurse directed us to the Lonand primary health center. With one eye on the clock and the other on Anil, we reached Lonand at 6 am. After preliminary examinations, the doctor directed us to the Satara civil hospital. Throughout, we kept updating Paresh, our program manager, from Tata Trusts. CEO, Satara Zilla Parishad coordinate with *Balrakshak* Dr. Rajendra Ranjane and we made arrangements to see him in Satara.

As we placed Anil in the ambulance and started to get in, Bhausingh's contractor objected. 'Who's going to cut the sugarcane if he leaves? Why don't we get something done locally?'





I shouted 'Burn that sickle! Instead of worrying about Anil you are worried about your sugarcane?' We threatened him with police action if he didn't let us all go. I berated Bhausingh for taking his son to the fields. 'Your reckless behavior could cost him his future!'

Civil surgeon recommended plastic surgery at Karad's Krishna hospital.

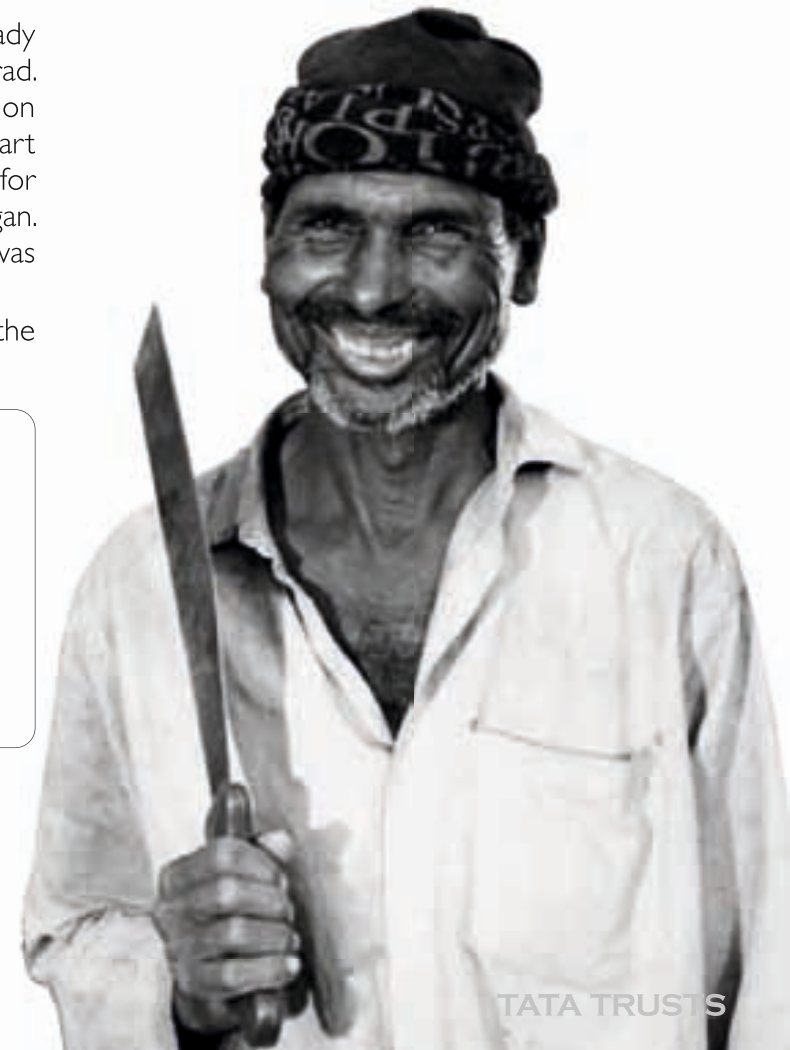
Anil's screams of pain pushed us on. Our day had already taken us from Andori to Lonad to Satara and finally Karad. Finally, at 5 pm Bhausingh carried his son into the hospital on his back. I was out of money and the doctor wouldn't start treatments without a down payment. Paresh arranged for money from Tata Trusts and Anil's treatment finally began. After a week, we finally took him back home. His mother was elated, and she thanked me profusely.

In the meantime, water from my fields were damaging the neighbor's crops. With more fires to put out, I left.

#### Accidents in the sugarcane field

Every year children and labourers face several types of dangers in the fields like -getting cut by sugarcane stalks, cuts and bruises in their bare feet, danger of death by poisonous snake venom etc. Sometimes they are seriously injured by their sickles while working.

However, some of the less evident dangers the children have to contend with include- being run over by tractors.





The sweet tea turned bitter...

That evening, as I walked into the settlement, I was disturbed by the troubled atmosphere. The usual hustle bustle was replaced by an uneasy quiet. Ducking into Rahul's hut, I found his mother sitting there- dejected and disheartened. 'Is something wrong? I just wanted to remind you to send Rahul to school tomorrow as well!'

She wiped her tears when she heard my voice and invited me for tea. As the tea leaves slowly simmered on the stove, she sighed, 'We've been transferred and have to leave tomorrow. What will happen to Rahul's future now? He'll laze around all day and not go to school either.'

I was speechless. I couldn't believe that diligent Rahul wouldn't be in school anymore.

'My son loves bullocks,' she continued. 'Taking care of them, driving to the market- those used to be his favorite activities. But he gave it all up without protest when you talked to him about school. You've disciplined and mentored him like he was your own child. And he loves his time there. He'd eagerly share excited stories about the new games he played every day, the food he ate, the prizes he won and now all of that is over...We will really miss you!'

Words failed me as I watched her eyes brimming over with unshed tears. As the tea boiled, she was bubbling with questions about her son's future. 'Is there a school for him





where we're going? Will they enroll him?

'We don't feel like leaving. But we have no choice. In all that talking, the tea had reduced to nothing by the time she realized it. With a start she realized it and apologized,

'I'm so sorry, I didn't notice the tea is almost burnt out.' As we sipped the tasteless concoction, I counseled Rahul's dad to enroll him in school in their new location. 'It's the law,' I reiterated. 'They have to enroll him.' He just nodded.

But I couldn't shake off the bitter doubts in my head. 'Will he go to school? Will he get admission?'

These thoughts embittered my heart just like the tea.

*Kop*- a small hut

While the laborers own proper houses in their villages, for 6 months they live in small 6x6 huts. These huts are built from locally available raw material and sugarcane straw. The factory provides them with mats and plastic sheets that are used to wrap the outside of the tents to keep it safe from rain. Cow dung is used to plaster both the insides and outsides of the hut. The insides are sparsely furnished with a few vessels and basic groceries. The fire stove for cooking is placed outside. And that in short is their small mobile world for the next 6 months.







## The Sickle

Look, is that the incongruous sickle that forces people to forsake home and loved ones for half the year? The one robbing children's innocence and depriving them of life altering learning? I'm sharing an incident starring this infamous character:

A group of workers arrived in Patharvasti for the season with a larger number of kindergartners and other school age children than usual. On my daily escort duty of the children to school, I would see them playing along the streets. The minute they spotted me, they'd run away and warn others to stay away else I'd take them to the dreaded 'school'.

One day, as we walked along, I heard a baby's loud wails. We tried to locate it. Someone pointed me towards a corner where a three month old baby had rolled over onto a pile of sugarcane straw. The sharp edges had cut the baby's tender skin all over the face, hands, legs. I picked up the unhappy child and looked around to locate the parents. The sound of the relentless sickle continuing its task coupled with the loud trampling feet in the straw as they moved on all but drowned out the it's distress. Similes of the powerful sickle and the pen came to mind. I called out louder to draw attention. On my second call, the parents came running with everyone. "What's wrong?"

I silently exchanged the weeping baby for the sickle.





'Let's go to the doctor.'

He hesitated. 'Later. The tractor's almost full. I'll go in the evening. We'll dust the wounds with powder now.'

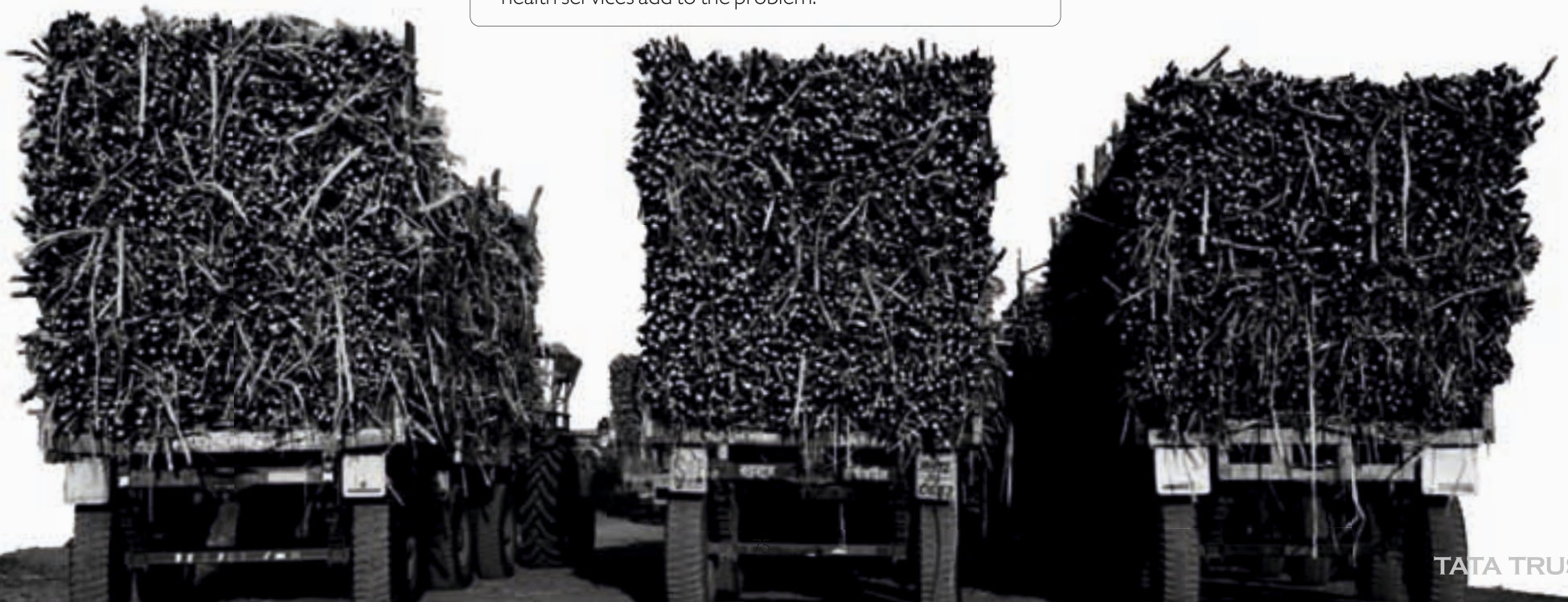
'Then let me take it now.'

'Why? I'll definitely go in the evening!'

Savleram Sukhdev Kale, one of my fourth graders worriedly asked me, 'Once I've finished school, I won't have to do all this, will I?'

#### Health hazards

Sunstroke, lack of clean water and sanitation, paucity of safe play areas, poor diet etc. are some of the other problems the children deal with regularly. Absences of supplementary diet, Vaccination, access to Anganwadi and health services add to the problem.







## Never ending fear...

Our training manual taught us to first bond with the children and then gradually, ease the topic of school into our conversations.

Chaklamba residents Bandu and Monica (Grade 5), Atesh (Grade 6), Yogesh (Grade 7) had been attending school in their village.

Here, they worked in the fields. As per my training, I spent a couple of days getting to know them and then suggested school.

Their parents weren't convinced. After 15 days of negotiations and answering questions like - 'Why school, has anyone benefitted from education? We didn't get them with us to send them to school etc.' - they agreed.

The school was 3 ½ kms away which meant a daily round trip walk of around 14 kms for me. The children complained about the long walk, new place and more importantly, the difficulty in crossing the main Neera-Baramati road. But I personally escorted them to their class and handed them over to their teacher.

It was the 2nd or 3rd day of school. The children came in late while the prayers were already on and stood in line with the 11th graders. The supervising teacher walked around with a cane and whistle to discipline the children. He started caning them without waiting for explanations.





Scared, they ran and stood in another line. Getting into class, the fear was still there. And worse, the local children took advantage of their humiliation and started taunting them about their dirty clothes and refused to let them sit.

Frustrated, they ran back home. Listening to their terrible experiences, I couldn't stop crying.

15 days of negotiations and 14 kms of walking were brought to naught by the teacher's rash actions.

The bruises on the children infuriated the parents as well. It took me 4 more days to convince them to reconsider. I visited the principal with my supervisor and lodged a complaint about the incident. I even threatened to complain to the local politicians. They gave me their word to take better care.

At our request, the principal counselled the teacher and local children. More importantly, the teachers gifted Monica and Yogesh with a book and pen. The children were overjoyed and started attending school whenever they got time off from work.

#### Punishments

As per the Right to Education Act, children cannot be punished either physically or mentally. But even today, teachers stress on physical punishments to discipline them. Coming from distant locations and humble family backgrounds, these children are not used to such treatment. They are already dealing with teachers armed with rulers and big roads to traverse to reach school. Lack of kind treatment can turn them away from school. Already, a large number of children don't like school because of such physical punishments.





It's written in the signs

I was busy visiting everyone in the new group and completing the survey. After 5-10 huts, I felt something tugging the back of my shirt. Turning around, I saw this 3 ½ foot curly haired, smiling face tugging my hand and pulling me to his hut.

'Hi, what's your name?' He smiled.

'You go to school?' Another smile.

'Where are you from?' He just smiled.

Just then we reached his hut. His mom was making Bhakris and his dad was resting.

This was Gangadhar More's household from Jalgaon district, Chopda taluka. They didn't own land and relied on daily wages. At the start of season, they'd take a loan and then start working to pay it off. Ishwar, aged 15, their older son, had left school in fourth grade. He'd forgotten how to read and write now and was currently working for half wages. His parents had taken a loan against his name as well.

'And is this dashing hero in school? All he does is smile when I ask him something.' I pointed to my silent friend as I spoke.

His mother laughed, 'That's my son Pankaj and he's mute. He loves school though and is in second grade. But how will he manage here? Will teachers accept him? I don't want anyone hitting him for no reason. I worry about him.'

'Is that it? You leave everything to me! I'll take him to school





every day. And if you are running late, the boys wait in my house. You don't need to worry about anything. We give the children - all the school supplies- bags, books and uniforms as well'.

As I spoke to his mother, Pankaj's face was alight with pleasure. By the time we had started talking about school uniforms and books, he was dancing in delight.

Every day he's ready before everyone and urges them on in his eager voice. He hangs on to my hand on the way to school. He's a darling with the teachers as well.

Pankaj and his parents are the ideal brand ambassadors in convincing other parents to send their children to school.

#### Community participation

Migrating children don't normally carry their school books and supplies with them. This is mainly because they aren't even sure if they will get admission in the new schools after they move. For these children, the ASHAA initiative collects community donations for bags, stationery, books, uniforms, shoes etc.







## Constant Worrying... two stories

The new group had come into Nirgudwadi from Korhale Khurd. Bhakti and Pratiksha, had been attending school in Korhale.

After dropping the children from Trupti's and my group to school, I went to pick the girls up. I was my first time going to their school. On my way, I asked Rani if she wanted to tag along. She agreed.

On the outskirts of Nirgudwadi, there's a dense forest. It was a quiet road, surrounded by huge trees and it was scary walking alone.

As a child, I had heard a lot of spooky stories about the forest and incidents I had seen of how people used to cremate bodies there.

I badly wanted to run away, but I knew I had to keep my promise. So, with cell phone blasting loud music, we started walking and chatting holding Rani's hand in mine.

I asked her about her village, but her short answers ended that topic quite quickly. It was a long road and Rani kept asking me if we were there yet. I kept telling her that we had almost made it, but the road kept snaking on and on.

Without no one in sight, I was relieved to finally spot some huts in the distance. We finally collected the 2 girls and headed on our long way back. We dropped Bhakti, but it was a further walk to Pratiksha's school. Luckily, Prashant, cluster





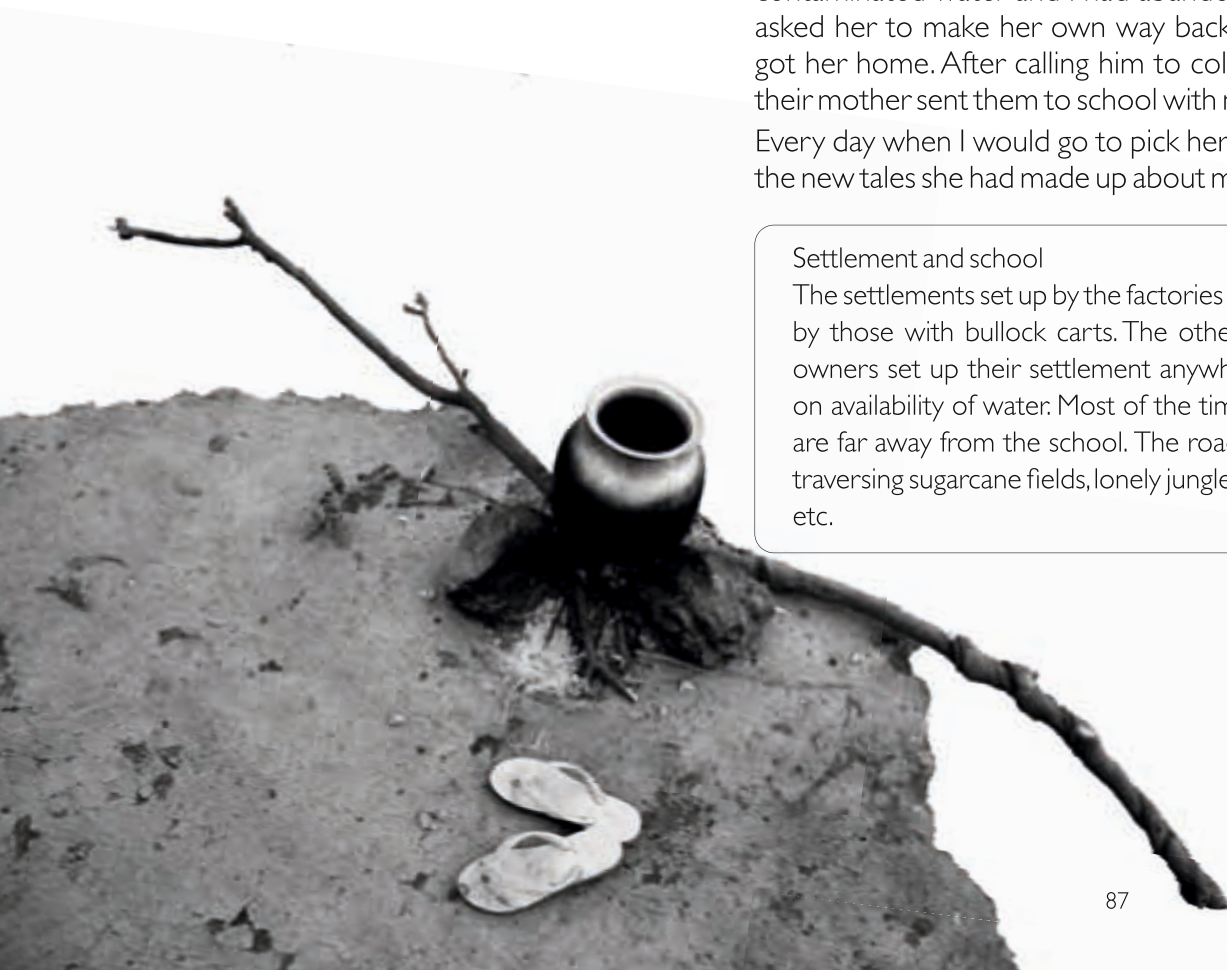
cordinators, was driving by and he offered us a ride. Pratiksha's class teacher Ms. More welcomed her with a rose. I worried about the next day, would the children return considering the long journey? They had agreed when I had asked them the previous day. But what if they changed their mind?

I reached Bhakti's hut with Payal to pick her up. Seeing us, Bhakti started crying and lied that Payal had given her contaminated water and I had abandoned her half way and asked her to make her own way back home. Prashant had got her home. After calling him to collaborate on the facts, their mother sent them to school with me.

Every day when I would go to pick her, I would worry about the new tales she had made up about me.

#### Settlement and school

The settlements set up by the factories are mainly used only by those with bullock carts. The other truck and tractor owners set up their settlement anywhere they can based on availability of water. Most of the time, such settlements are far away from the school. The road to school involves traversing sugarcane fields, lonely jungle patches, graveyards etc.







## Look out for the harvester

The 2018-19 sugar harvesting season was on. Vishal (5th grade), from Chumbli (Block-Patoda, Dist.-Beed) and his family were back. Last year, he'd regularly attended 4th grade classes in fear of his cousin's threats if he didn't. Luckily, this year as well he started school without a fuss.

However, 15-20 days later he suddenly stopped. We dropped in for a visit. His father said, 'It was his decision. He gets into the truck every morning.' So, I tried talking to Vishal, but he wouldn't say a word. After a while his father said, 'If he doesn't want to study, let him ruin his life like us.'

We visited regularly. But he'd never speak, and his father would talk for him. We were stumped. One day, his neighbor, Mrs. Pavne explained, 'Vishal's sickle moves faster than others. When he goes to school, his father can't meet daily targets. As soon as he's awake they bundle him into the truck even though he wants to attend school.'

I was angry with his father's duplicity. 'How can a father do that?'

She said, 'His father bribes him with Rs.10 to eat bhajias every evening. How could he come to school?'

We arranged a meeting with all the parents at the settlement. Village officials, Asha initiative's head, other district officials- were also present. We discussed children's education and health at length.





We concluded, 'The harvesters are here! You need to start looking for alternative occupations or die! Factories would find it easier to manage machines than people. Let your children graduate high school and complete professional courses. Save them from starvation and death!

We spoke to Vishal's father who was visibly moved again and convinced him. Even though his father doesn't meet his targets, Vishal is happy attending school.

#### Harvester

This machine is used to harvest sugarcane. It's especially useful in large tracts of land that are accessible by proper roads. Although it's costlier than manual labor, its output is equivalent to that of 100 workers per day. In Satara, a factory has obtained 27 such harvesters. In the future if they can be adapted to work on smaller land areas, the laborers will face unemployment.





## Lamb to the slaughter

In Maharashtra's Marathwada region, farmer suicides are quite common. Reasons range from bankruptcy to poor harvest. However, there's now a disturbing rise in teenage suicides.

In the harvest season of 2018-19, a family of 3 (parents and teenage daughter Rani- 12th grade) from Aurangabad was working in Late, Baramati for the past 3 months. We visited the settlement regularly to increase school enrollment.

Rani's love for learning was evident from how she tried to convince the youngsters to attend school. She wanted to continue her studies, she requested us. Inquiries confirmed her education. However, the Right to Education was limited only till the 8th grade, so we couldn't enroll her in the local high school. Further, since she had been withdrawn her to work in the fields, her chances of continuing later were also slim.

They seemed to be more interested in getting her married. Most boys were also married early so they could earn a whole wage (one sickle). Half way through the harvest season, on 30th January, I got a troubling call from Tushar Jadhav, the village mobiliser.

He told me that Rani had committed suicide. We spoke to one of the women there, who told us how unhappy Rani had been. Her parents had decided to marry her off on returning.







Frustrated, she had ended her life.

We heard that Rani had pleaded with them every day to send her back to school to no avail. Before she left the village, she had warned them, 'I'm crying now but you'll be crying on your way back!'

The burning question remains- was she the sacrificial lamb on the altar of society, circumstance, family pressure, traditions or humanity?

Priority survival not education

Generations of families have dedicated their lives to perfecting the art of harvesting sugarcane to meet their basic needs. They pride in their skills and feel that education cannot feed them. Sadly, this misconception flourishes due to the large number of youngsters with D.Ed. or B.Ed. also working in the fields. So, instead of wasting money on education, they feel it is better to focus on survival. Regrettably, a lot of rebel teenage boys and girls are sacrificed at this altar.



## Our transfer

'We've been transferred to Mirewadi where they're a sickle short,' said Pavan's father, Sukhdev Gunja in a dry tone as the bags were being loaded.

Pavan (age 7) sat in the trailer as his mother packed the last few belongings. The others in the settlement were already at work in the fields.

Such transfers were quite common. Before this, they had been in Morgaon. Schooling was new to them and it had taken more than 8 days to convince them to send Pavan to school.

'Where are you from? What will we get? How do we send him there alone?' I had fended these questions and more before Pavan had joined school. And the talkative boy had blended in with the others effortlessly.

Some days later, I received a frantic call from a teacher: 'Pavan is not here and we don't know where he is!'

I panicked and searched everywhere. Finally, I called his parents only to find out that he was in the fields.

So, I requested two grannies - Lilabai and Haisabai to keep tabs on him.

His parents saw him learning and growing well and liked it. They were scheduled to share their experience at the upcoming school gathering in 3 days. And now they were leaving!





Lailabai and Haisabai were visibly upset.

Pavan's mother also in tears, promised to visit soon. Pavan kept asking his mother, 'I want to go to school.' But no one answered him. Sukhdev was also sad. As their cart moved Pavan's mother bid everyone goodbye and Pavan got a parting gift of Rs. 10 from the doting grannies.

2 1/2 months of togetherness were at an end. Will Pavan go to school again? Will it be a nice place with friendly people? Only questions accompanied them.

#### Internal migration

Each year the factory has a defined sugarcane harvesting schedule. Based on this plan, workers are moved around every 15-20 days. Keeping in mind the educational needs of these children, the initiative can also track 'migration in' and 'migration out' digitally.











About TataTrusts:

Tata Trusts is amongst India's oldest, non-sectarian philanthropic organizations that work in several areas of community development. Since its inception, Tata Trusts has played a pioneering role in transforming traditional ideas of philanthropy to make impact full sustainable change in the lives of the communities served. Guided by the principles of its founder, Jamshetji Tata and through his vision of proactive philanthropy, the Trusts catalyze societal development while ensuring that initiatives and interventions have a contemporary relevance to the nation; in areas of education; healthcare and nutrition; rural livelihoods; natural resources management; enhancing civil society and governance and media, arts, crafts and culture. Through collaborations with government bodies, international agencies and like-minded private sector organizations, Tata Trusts has strengthened its contribution to the developmental landscape of the country to nurture a self-sustaining eco-system that collectively works across all these areas. For more information please visit [www.tatatrusts.org](http://www.tatatrusts.org)

**TATA TRUSTS**