

An umbrella for quality education

Through collective efforts by government departments and village communities, Varitra Foundation is giving a new lease of life to rural schools in Karnal, writes Sneha Bhattacharjee

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2018 revealed that strategic planning and implementation are the need of the hour to bridge the chasm between the 20 per cent urban masses who have access to quality education and opportunities and the remaining 80 per cent scattered across rural schools in India. This widening divide throws light on how our children are lagging behind with the rest of the world. It is this lack of education that could impede India's overall growth says Fitch Ratings in its Global Economic Outlook putting India's potential growth rate at 6.7 per cent for the next five years. While there are small improvements in the Indian education system, the crisis in terms of outcomes, continues.

With the simple idea of giving "output" to the "outcomes" coupled with the thought "alone we can do so little; together we can do so much", two friends set up a foundation to act as facilitators between schools in rural areas, government departments, non-governmental organisations and funders. Thus was born Varitra Foundation in 2018.

It was while working for corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, which both — founder Baljeet Yadav and co-founder, Ayesha Kalyan — realised the potential of a

platform where those who needed funds and those who wanted to disburse funds could come together and build a partnership.

"We knew there were ideas, but none of them really produced any results. Thus we envisioned to bring a change through collective efforts at the grassroots," says Yadav. A Sanskrit word, Varitra means umbrella. "It symbolised synergy, collaboration and a canopy of ideas in developmental terms," he adds.

The foundation has developed a mechanism linked to specific sectors to facilitate a more strategic and disciplined approach that will increase developmental effectiveness and operational efficiency. "We design our programmes as supplementary to the government programmes to maximise the outcomes of the government programs," says Yadav. The flagship project of the foundation — SEARCH (Strengthening Quality Education Access to Rural Children of Haryana) — has reached over 3,250 students across 15 government schools with over 6,000 plus books being donated.

They strongly believe a community needs to take ownership of its social development programmes for the larger sustainability. Therefore, they empower the communities and help them to recognise their strengths and design programmes based on their strengths. "We have 23 on-field volunteers working across 15 schools in Karnal currently, who take care of post remedial classroom sessions for children in primary classes," Yadav adds.



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The flagship project of the foundation has reached over 3,250 students across 15 government schools with over 6,000 plus books being donated

"First, we look at the transformation of school, in terms of necessities and resources. We work on how we can bring the government departments on board by involving the entire village along with the teachers of the school," he says. He notes that constant follow ups with government departments is a more challenging task than getting the village community to work for a school in their area. "Second, we create a child centric environ-

ment by building libraries and post school learning centre," he adds. Having done this already since their project inception in January last year, the foundation is looking to looking to work on instilling leadership qualities among children and enable them to become changemakers.

A basic principle that the foundation believes is not to duplicate what is already being done at the grassroots. Thus, they focus on building leadership qualities in people who come on board with them, and let them become change-makers. The foundation started its first project in January 2018 in Karnal. The focus was on overall transformation of government schools in collaboration with government organisations such as the education department, MNREGA, etc. "We wanted to merge government schemes and reach out to government schools that needed help. We did a recce of around 25 schools, of which, six came on board," says Yadav adding that the schools that were ready to partner with them and not just gain benefit out of the work were roped in. They are now hoping to take the number of schools to 25 by this year end.

The foundation strives to implement meaningful and relevant developmental initiatives through partnerships with other development organisations for a larger social and financial impact. "Our goal is to maximise the reach of people to their basic rights in education, health, livelihood through scaling the organisation's projects in a gradual and sustainable manner," says Yadav.