



Annual Report

2020-2021

QUALITY EDUCATION SUPPORT TRUST

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Our QUEST



This is the first time I am writing a foreword for the Annual Report as the President of QUEST. A change in leadership of

any organization is a big step. Atul Kulkarni was the president since QUEST's inception, for the last 13 years, and had handled the responsibility with a deep commitment and a broad vision. However, he had informed us two years ago about his wish to retire from his position, and the Board of Trustees was preparing for this change and taking the steps required. I have been a founder trustee of QUEST, and have been the vice president for the last 3 years. After Atul's retirement in February 2021, I took over as the President. I am well aware of the challenges and responsibilities of this post, having seen the growth of the organization closely. From a small start-up Trust with a meager monetary contribution from the Trustees, QUEST has now grown into a well-established NGO in the field of education. We have been implementing a variety of programs for quality education, supported by leading foundations and individual donors. The programs have received recognition by Government agencies as well as teachers and educators. I have been a proud observer of this entire journey.

As you will read in this annual report, QUEST has survived the covid pandemic and the lockdowns in a remarkable way. Using online technology, the QUEST team has successfully reached out to teachers, children and parents. Some of the programs have been redesigned to address the need of the hour. 'Gatuvit', the specially developed learning management system, is being used widely by teachers and educators. Despite all the challenges, the team is working with the same rigour as before, to ensure the delivery of quality education.

Since the schools have remained closed for a year, most children are experiencing a heavy 'learning loss'. It is even more acute in the case of marginalized children who have little or no access to digital infrastructure. QUEST has conducted a study to pinpoint the areas in which the children are experiencing learning loss, and has prepared a teaching plan to mitigate it. The results of this initiative will be known in the coming academic year. QUEST's level based learning program 'Anupad' has become all the more relevant now, where children are taught according to their learning level and not their grade level.

In the education sector, National Education Policy 2020 has brought about a new perspective. For the first time, Early Childhood Education which was undervalued all these years, is being recognized as a 'Foundational Stage'. For QUEST and other organizations working in this field, this is a positive change, though proper steps need to be devised to implement the new policy.

With all these changes taking place, QUEST is also poised to develop a new educational campus at Sonale, where we have our headquarters. We are planning to set up four centers –

1. Center of excellence for teachers and educators which will offer opportunities for their continuous professional development.
2. Educational experience center which will demonstrate effective pedagogic strategies for children, parents and teachers.
3. Educational Research, Development and Extension center which will aim to bridge the critical gap in educational research in the Indian context.
4. Center for visual and performing arts in education which will aim to explore the role of theatre and other visual arts in education.

The campus will have residential facility and we hope that a diverse group of people will come and share their knowledge and insights. The covid pandemic has delayed our timelines to some extent, but the Board of Trustees and the QUEST team are working hard towards creating this unique space in the near future.

The year 2020-21 has shown us that our efforts at organization building have really worked very well. We have a very strong and resilient senior management team which remained unfazed in this difficult period and held the organization together. Consequently, the entire team worked together to face the challenges. Our donors and funders also supported us, showing faith in our work. We have not just survived the covid year, but have pushed ourselves to explore new horizons in keeping with our vision. I take this opportunity to thank all of you and look forward to your support in future.

– Manoj Karyekar

About us

Vision

An egalitarian society where every individual leads a dignified life.



Mission

To enrich the learning experience of under-served children through the professional development of teachers and educators.

Strategic Priorities



Demonstrate the replicability of quality education interventions at scale to inform and strengthen the Public (Government) Education System



Develop innovative solutions to bridge gaps in the field of ECE and Elementary Education



Build a team of inspired professionals committed to enhancing the quality of education

In memoriam



A senior figure from the corporate world and a long-time supporter of QUEST, Mr Yashwant Deosthalee, passed away on November 18, 2020. He was the former Chairman of L & T Finance and a well-known philanthropist. Mr Deosthalee not only provided financial support to QUEST, but also guided us to build a professionally sound organization. He helped us to dream big. The QUEST team is committed to continue the efforts to bring those dreams into reality.



Subodh Kembhavi was a teacher and mentor associated with QUEST for over 10 years. He passed away on May 13, 2021. He was involved in QUEST's Shikshak program as a resource person and mentor, working closely with many teachers and teacher educators. He was interested in trying out experimental or alternative pedagogy. His intellect, experience and his humorous nature made him popular with all the participants. The QUEST team will miss him dearly.

Interventions



A programme to strengthen the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Service in Anganwadis through systematic input to Anganwadi workers and Supervisors

A Level-based learning programme to address the needs of children who are trailing behind their grade appropriate achievement level by building capacities of teachers



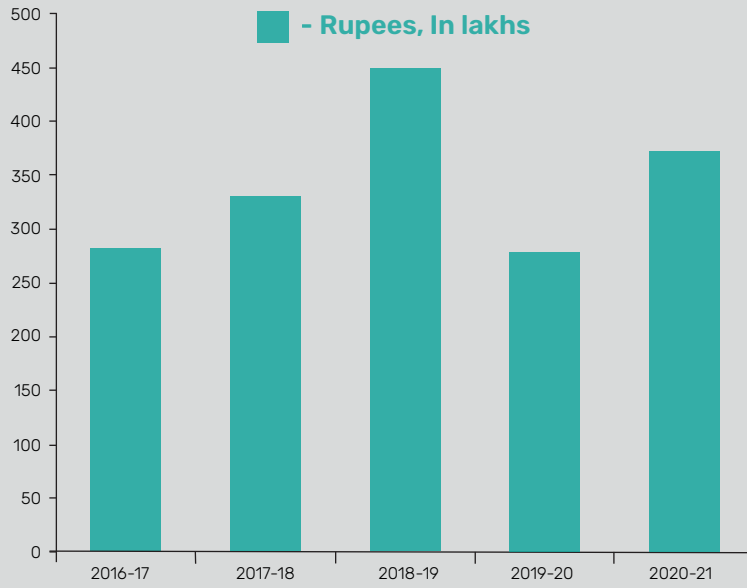
A programme for ongoing professional development of elementary school teachers and educators through blended mode courses (Face-to-face sessions + online mentoring)

Centres to strengthen the foundation of elementary school children through active, collaborative, child centred learning which helps to generate pedagogical knowhow

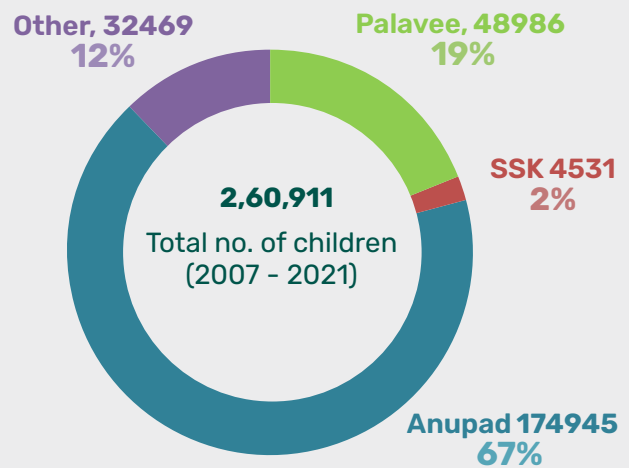
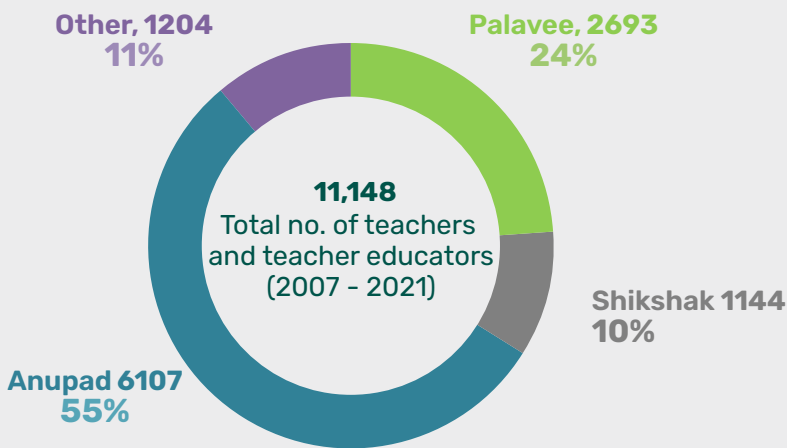
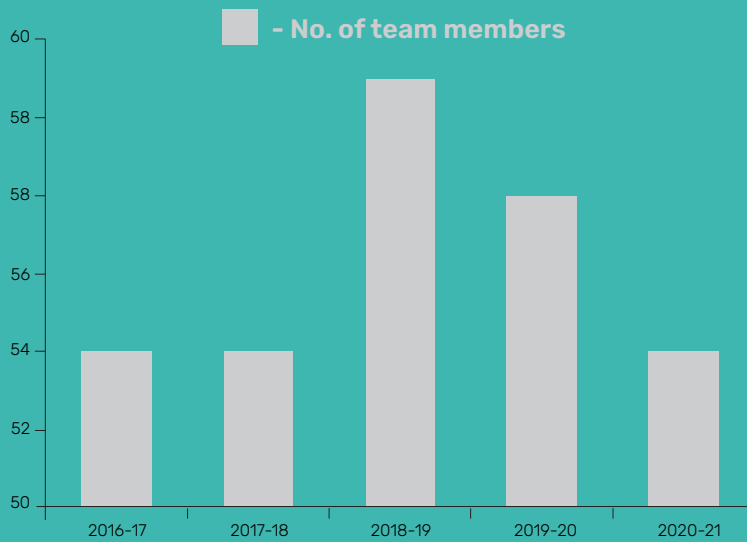


Growth and impact

GRANTS & DONATIONS



PERSONNEL



A word on the realisation of dreams undreamt

The year 2020 started on an unbelievably high note for us. The last 2-3 years of working on building the organization was coming to a heady fruition. From a position of believing that 'small is beautiful' and 'we just can't think of scaling our flagship programs', we were ready and confident of making the big leap. So much so that in early February 2020, we committed to a budget of Rs 8.25 Crores for FY 20-21 to the Charity Commissioner, up from Rs 4.89 in the previous Financial Year.

A number of factors went into making this leap. They included:

A lucid, inspiring and clearly articulated vision and mission to guide us. Strategic objectives translated into a cogent 5-year plan to work upon. A professionally trained senior leadership team with well-defined roles and responsibilities that made up our Management Committee to steer the organisation. Full compliance with all the legal, financial and operational rules and regulations of running a Trust, with systems and processes in place. A conscious move from a reactive funding strategy to a more proactive funding strategy to achieve set targets resulting in a healthy pipeline of future funding to support our scaling-up objectives. A healthy corpus emanating both from a generous contribution from the Late Mr. Yashwant Deosthalee and our own prudent financial management over the years. And finally, a commitment from the ATE Chandra Foundation to support our future organization building ambitions and requirements.

And then came March 2020, along with the dreaded Pandemic.

Schools and Anganwadis, our primary places of work, were the first to completely shut down, bringing an abrupt end to our field operations and thereby our programs. By April, the lockdowns started getting extended indefinitely. While our existing Funders supported us completely, the much anticipated new funding was stalled abruptly.

In a resilience measurement workshop that we participated in, we took the Dasra ResiLens Stress Test.

The exercise put us in the abject 4th Quadrant, defined as 'Fight for Survival'. The graph below indicates the various quadrants.

Despite many pressures, there were two very important decisions taken with the support of our Trustees: Firstly, we will stay true to our stated purpose of Education and not change it to any Covid related Health issue, unlike many other organizations, and secondly, we will not let go of any team member, since they are our greatest, most irreplaceable asset built over the years. Next, our well-set processes and strong organizational structure helped us make quick decisions while running against the tide. Cost optimization, program repurposing, employee engagement for morale building, Funder re-alignment agreements, creating a new pipeline for re-purposed programs and at the same time ensuring that we stayed well and safe, were some of the important steps taken.

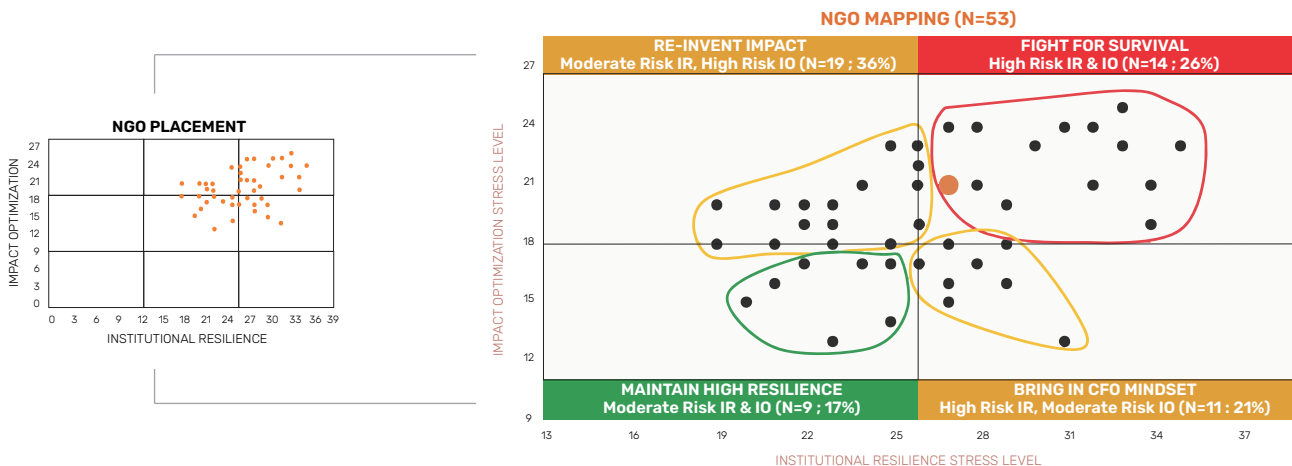
We clawed our way back to the 1st Quadrant, defined as 'Bring in CFO mindset' in about 3 months and became a much-acclaimed success story in the Social Sector: QUEST was chosen as the representative organization to talk about how an investment in diligent Organization Building pays at the prestigious Pay-What-it-Takes Forum, which was part of the Dasra Philanthropic Week.

Several efforts over the years factored in our remarkable recovery. One of the prominent among them was our investment over the last 3-4 years in Gatuvit, our Knowledge Management System. It was quickly converted into a comprehensive Learning Management System that helped us repurpose our programs to include online training components, expand our reach to both existing and new beneficiaries, get new funders and funding sources, and not only survive but flourish in unimaginably satisfying ways. We proudly close the year 2020-21 with an income of INR 4.06 Cr.

It goes without saying that the unstinted support of our Funders, Partners, Well-wishers and all other stakeholders made us strong and resilient, both financially and emotionally.

- Preeti Misra Shenoy, Director - New Initiatives

Risk assessment reveals Quality Education Support Trust is placed in 'FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL' zone



47% of the respondents are in a high financial stress; 36% can mitigate impact dilution if proactive re-invent actions are taken. Approximately, 1 in 5 are in a zone of high resilience of finance and impact

Repurposing the Programs

With schools and Anganwadis closed during the lockdown, no field work was possible for the QUEST team. The work, however, had to continue in some form or the other, not only as per demands from the funders but also because school closure was going to result in problems for children which no one had experienced before.

The QUEST team responded to the 'new normal' by revising some of the existing programs. In some cases, the repurposing brought in new stakeholders – the parents. In other cases, the team had to acquire new skills to reach out to the children using online technology.

In this section, read about how we restructured our programs and also about a research study on Learning Loss.

Online Education in Pandemic Times - Putting Things in Perspective

As COVID-19 crisis resulted in school closures, online education received centre stage as an alternative mode of learning. The transition to online education was relatively smooth for well-endowed private schools in big cities. Though, it was a challenging task for under-resourced rural schools with a modicum of connectivity. It was presumed that merely filling the connectivity gap would result in online teaching-learning. It was also noticed that all around there was a lack of awareness about the training and pedagogical aspects of online education. This unawareness led to an approach of inundating teachers with online material. The onus of learning the online mode was shifted on teachers to sift through overflowing but disorganized material.

This backdrop prompted QUEST to focus on its core activity of teachers' professional development, albeit in a digital mode. The 'Samjun Umjun' program which was till now conducted as in-person sessions and which had a gamut of courses, was modified so as to conduct it digitally. The program connected disparate dots of online education and provided a composite framework for its practical use in a real-life environment.

As a strategy, QUEST used the concept of flipped classroom. All participants would receive measured content of the next day's session in advance, such as academic articles translated for easy reading, some examples from children's work conducted by QUEST and curated instructional videos. This flipped mode of conducting the course helped to elicit responses and set the tone for the interactive nature of sessions.

Each zoom-based course was for 6 days with a daily session of 1.5 hours. The sessions often stretched well past the scheduled duration owing to the keen interest shown by the participants which reflected in intense discussions. Not only teachers but even parents, educationists, researchers and education enthusiasts attended these courses from different parts of the state.

Even as online education became a buzzword, little was known about its distinct pedagogy, just like teaching in the classroom has its own. Though started as an experiment, QUEST immediately put in place rudiments of online learning. The 1.5 hour sessions were crisp, with PowerPoint slides made with curated content. The extempore remarks or questions by enthusiastic participants were respected knowing stimulated curiosity of participants. The principle of participation by all was inbuilt in the course content. Thus, QUEST was quick enough to master the idioms of effective learning on the online platforms.

The course also created a reflective space for participants, especially teachers. Participants stayed connected with each other and mentors via a Whatsapp group. This group helped teachers build rapport with their counterparts from different regions and develop an active community for participatory growth. The course provided insights for judicious use of material for online teaching. Teachers also realized that though good connectivity remains a thorny issue, their real challenge still revolves around pedagogical issues.

Overall, QUEST conducted 16 courses during the period from April to August, covering 602 participants from 28 districts in Maharashtra. The same courses were later conducted with teachers from Hingoli and Nandurbar, from September onwards, in collaboration with DIET.

When the lockdown started in March 2020, QUEST showed alacrity in leveraging its core role as teachers' educator with online mode. The Samjun Umjun online courses were an experimental response to the alarming situation of the school closure.

This initiative was well-received by all stakeholders, so much so that their all-round credentials stood out in the crowded melee of online education.

Learning curve of participants translated from their own words

Satyavan Agivale

Assistant Professor of Surgery, Veterinary Institute, Udgir

I joined the Samjun Umjun program as a parent. The course taught me the importance of participating in my daughter's learning process – talking to her, reading out a story and trying to answer the questions popping from her curious mind. In the course, I received orientation about the importance of emergent literacy and children's written expressions. Now, I encourage my daughter to scribble whatever comes to her mind. Later, I engage her in a conversation to know what she has scribbled – now I know it's actually a form of emergent writing.



Praveen Ruikar

Subject Assistant (Marathi), DIET Hingoli

During the QUEST course, I learnt how to conduct online sessions effectively, how to use videos, drawing participation from all. As a trainer and teacher educator, I observed carefully how Nilesh Nimkar had shown us videos. He would pause at a predetermined place to draw responses from us. I now follow the same technique in my training sessions. Also, I have learnt to focus on the teachers' needs during training, which brings positive feedback from participants. Deep down I know that the change in my training technique was only possible due to QUEST.

Vishal Chavan

Teacher, Nandurbar

The course taught me new perspectives on early literacy. Earlier, I would expect children to have fluency in reading and writing at the end of grade 1. Now I know that children's writing blossoms in various learning phases with support from a teacher. I am more patient to allow children to learn at their pace. I teach children scattered in small hamlets of Nandurbar. Most of their parents are labourers with no smartphones. internet connectivity is also not good. Instead of fretting over it, I now visit hamlets, gather a few children and conduct the educational activities which I learnt in the course. The home language of children here is different from the standard Marathi. This key issue was addressed very well in QUEST's courses.



Rafique Sheikh

Teacher (Grade 1 & 2), Hingoli

QUEST's online course offers a lot of scope for interaction and knowledge-exchange. In the course, I learnt a step-by-step approach to achieve early literacy in children. I had heard about activities like 'read aloud', creating a 'reading and writing corner' etc. Thanks to the course, I learnt to apply them and involve children in them. The course made us aware about the macro aspects of early literacy pedagogy and it also taught us the relevance of micro aspects like punctuation marks. The videos were useful as the characters were echoing the problems that we face in rural context and there were very effective solutions.



- Rammohan Khanapurkar, freelance journalist and researcher, associated with QUEST for over 12 years.
With inputs from Rohit Choudhary & Anupamaa Joshi

Teachers, educators and parents reached through online courses

Anganwadi Majhya Ghari (Anganwadi in My House)



Anganwadi Sevika (left) showing a parent how to conduct an activity with the child

QUEST's Palavee program has reached over 1800 Anganwadis in Maharashtra. The objective of the program is to strengthen the Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the Anganwadis by training Anganwadi sevikas and Supervisors. This work came to a standstill during the lockdown as the Anganwadis were closed. When the government announced the 'unlock' process in October–November 2020, many offices, industries and some schools resumed their regular functioning. But Anganwadis continued to remain closed. This prolonged closure has caused a major setback to the learning process in children's formative years.

The QUEST team started exploring other ways of reaching ECE to the children: Would it be possible to engage parents as co-teachers? Can we use available technology to reach out to them and include them in the teaching-learning process? How do we orient them on conducting educational activities with children? How do we enlist the support of Anganwadi sevikas for this work? After some discussions, the 'Anganwadi Majhya Ghari' (Anganwadi in my house) initiative was born.

The broad outline of this initiative was as follows:

1. To create short videos showing how to conduct certain educational activities with children and send these videos to parents
2. To ask Anganwadi sevikas to create Whatsapp groups

of parents and post the videos in these groups along with instructions, and to appeal to parents to conduct those activities with children

3. To ask Anganwadi sevikas to show the videos to parents who don't have smartphones, when they come to the Anganwadi to collect rations for children's meals
4. To circulate worksheets to track the children's progress

The team selected a few activities on early literacy and numeracy, conducted them with one or two children and recorded videos using their mobile phones. However, these initial videos were not up to the mark - the camera angle was wrong, the audio was low and the teaching-learning materials were not seen clearly. The team had to go through a short round of training on these technical aspects. They learnt that the teacher and child should sit in a v-formation, not in a straight line; if they are sitting on the floor, the person with the camera should also sit down and hold the camera at their level, etc.

Once the videos were ready, they were circulated on the whatsapp groups with clear instructions. The parents took time to respond. The team had expected that parents would have problems in handling technology and there would be phone network issues. But there were other challenges - in many households, the mothers did not have access to mobile phones. If they had access, they did not know how to use the app or watch videos.

To overcome this difficulty, the QUEST team took the help of the AW sevikas during the 'unlock' phase and conducted parents' meetings in the Anganwadi. They showed the videos during the meetings, demonstrated the activities and asked the parents to conduct them on the spot to see if they had got the idea. They also asked the mothers to insist on getting access to phones, for at least 15 minutes every day, for the sake of their child's education. The team even made home visits along with the AW sevika to meet parents who didn't have mobile phones.

Slowly, many parents started taking an active interest in this work and asked to be added to the whatsapp groups. Some of them asked the QUEST team to organize a small exhibition of teaching-learning materials in their house and invited 8-10 parents from the neighborhood. If they didn't have access to children's books, they started requesting the AW worker to read aloud some books during the home visits.

To track the progress of children, the team prepared worksheets and recorded short videos on how the worksheets had to be filled by the children. The team had to communicate to the parents that it was 'ok' for the children to make mistakes, that each child would take her own time to learn, that they should use a friendly and soft tone while teaching and the most important factor – to have patience! The role of the Anganwadi sevikas was crucial to ensure that parents were conducting the activities properly and regularly and to check if they had any difficulty with worksheets.

All these efforts motivated many parents to start conducting the activities with their children as shown in the QUEST videos. Some parents even shared their own videos of teaching their children on the whatsapp groups. The QUEST team members gave them feedback, and slowly these groups became spaces of vibrant discussion on Early Childhood Education!

It was observed that along with parents, even grandparents and older siblings of children were participating in this work at home! Another interesting observation was about the resourcefulness of the parents – they used available household items to conduct the activities. For example, the QUEST video showed the use of cardboard circles to teach counting. The parents used bangles or cups & saucers or vegetables to conduct the same activity!

This new initiative is shaping and evolving through the team's responses to the various challenges. Parents' participation in their children's early learning is emerging as an essential component of ECE. It appears that 'Anganwadi Majhya Ghari' may become an integral part of the Palavee program in future!

- Anupamaa Joshi, with inputs from Meena Nimkar, Nilesh Nimkar, Gauri Rane



No. of parents
3457

No. of Anganwadi Sevikas
94

No. of Supervisors
20

Shikshan Samruddhi Kendra

QUEST runs a program called Shikshan Samruddhi Kendra in which children from grades 1 to 7 receive educational input by QUEST team members in parallel to their school input. Under this program, QUEST sets up Balbhavans in schools and trains personnel - Balmitras - in language and math pedagogy. These Balbhavans are also sites where new ideas are developed and piloted before they can be implemented on scale. In 2020, this program was adapted for an online mode in response to the school closure.

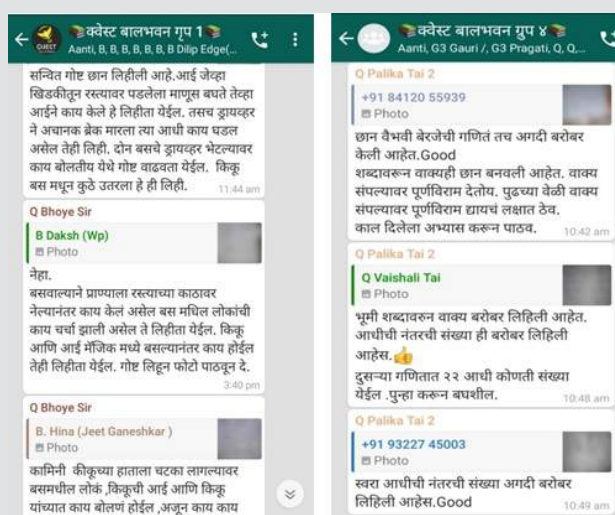
The first task for the SSK team in the process of adaptation was to establish contact with the children and gauge their wellbeing in the pandemic situation. However, getting in touch with the children was not simple. In the normal model, as the Balbhavans were set up in or around schools, children's contact details were not collected. The team tried to source some contact details from the teachers and then obtain details of more children through these contacts. But, sometimes the contact numbers shared by teachers were not working or were incorrect. While reaching out to the children of Ashram schools, it was also often found that a single person in the village had access to a mobile phone and the Balmitras could get in touch with the children in that village only through him/ her. In addition, some children were available only at a particular time as the parent with the mobile was out for work. Also, it often happened that there was little to no connectivity in the villages. Gradually, solving one problem at a time, the team was able to establish contact with 250 students out of 758 children who are part of the SSK program.

At that juncture, the possibility of reopening of schools was remote. The team wanted to ensure that these children do not remain cut off from an educational environment. For this purpose, the SSK team formed Whatsapp groups of the students and our team members. Upon further assessment, we formed level-wise groups of the students. In all, 6 groups were formed - 4 groups of Balbhavan students and 2 groups of students belonging to Anupad program. Two Balmitras were assigned to each group. The work consisted of solving Level-wise Worksheets which were prepared and shared on the Whatsapp groups. The Balmitras took regular follow-up with the students regarding completion of the worksheets and solving of doubts. As the work via Whatsapp started progressing, the team thought of using the Zoom platform which provided a scope to give new inputs to children. The SSK team attended sessions by Mr. Nilesh Nimkar which gave them a clearer idea of conducting input sessions via zoom. However, there were

still many obstacles. First, the platform was totally new not only for students, their parents but also for the team. The team members, under Pragati's guidance, learnt the essential aspects of the app and conducted trial meetings to get accustomed to the platform. The details such as downloading the app and signing in were shared with the parents elaborately. Many parents were not able to join the meeting at all and the team had to devise new ways such as sharing screenshots of the joining instructions, forming small groups of the parents to trouble-shoot issues, etc.

Second, many of the Balmitras lived in small villages and themselves did not have good network connectivity. In some cases, they had to travel significant distances from their homes in search of sufficient bandwidth. Often, the Balmitras had to stay put till late evenings in remote locations if they had to connect with the parents who were not available during the day time.

Third, the team had only a single laptop which was insufficient to carry out numerous tasks like preparing presentations or worksheets. Thus, the impact of digital divide was felt not only amongst the students but within the team as well. However, this did not deter the team from reaching out to the children and providing them educational inputs. They conducted regular activities through Whatsapp with 184 children and Zoom sessions with 90 Children.



Feedback by QUEST team to children on their work

Fourth, the prospect of providing inputs to the children in digital and distance mode was initially quite perplexing for the team. All these years they were used to teaching in the actual presence of the students. It took them a while to get accustomed to the online mode. The Balmitras had

to learn to guess how much the students have understood the inputs given to them and then take the sessions ahead. The entire team worked diligently during the whole period to prepare PowerPoint presentations, ensure attendance of students at the sessions, conduct the sessions and further give feedback to the children as and when required.

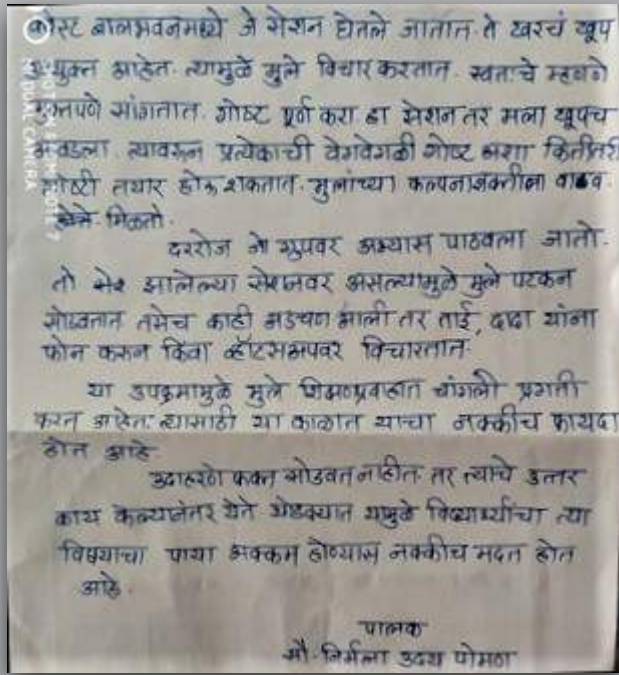
Over a period of time, the team started receiving positive feedback from the parents. They realized that the inputs being given online ensured that the children did not suffer heavily due to absence of schooling caused by the pandemic.

Nirmala Poman, a parent, in her feedback says that she feels the zoom sessions are effective because they make children think. She says that she particularly enjoyed the 'Finish The Story' session because she got to witness the

different stories that children made up. She writes that since the worksheets which the Balmitra sends on WhatsApp are based on the topics covered in zoom sessions, children can quickly solve the questions. She also adds that Balmitras are always available on call to solve any problems the parents or children may have. She appreciates that the Balamitras don't just ask questions but also discuss how the children have answered these questions.

The team continues to engage with the children in a meaningful way, despite all the challenges.

- Pranjal Koranne, with inputs from Pragati Raut, Project Coordinator, Shikshan Samrudhhi Kendra



No. of children reached through online medium

90

A study of 'Learning Loss'

It has long been understood that when schools are closed for a period of time, children lose some of what they had learned in school during these times. In the US they studied the 'learning loss' of children due to summer vacations. The studies had pointed out that children from low income families tended to suffer a greater and more prolonged loss. In the 2020 pandemic, some countries conducted studies to understand the learning loss of children after the few months of closures they had enforced. In India, as schools remained closed for more than 10 months, many have asked what loss in learning children would incur due to this. The research team at QUEST, under the leadership of the director Nilesh Nimkar designed a study to answer this question.

Through Mountains and Valleys

QUEST has been running its Anupad program with 18 Ashram Schools in the Nashik district of Maharashtra from 2018 with funding from NSE Foundation. As a part of the program, children from grades 5 to 7 had been assessed using a comprehensive diagnostic tool in 2018, 2019 and the latest round of assessment was completed in February 2020, just before the schools closed down. The assessment was conducted using a tab-based tool designed by Driya Interactive for QUEST. Post lockdown, the research team decided to conduct another round of assessment in January 2021 using the same tab-based tests for a sample of about 400 children. This way, when scores obtained by children on these two tests were compared, they would understand how much children lost what they had learned and in what areas.

Conducting the tests was easier said than done. Schools were still closed in January 2021 though everything else was opening. The project team had collected contact information of the children through their teachers and sorted the children based on the villages in which they lived. The team had a list of about 60 villages which they would have to visit in order to collect the testing data of about 400 children. Rajendra More, the project lead, was handed the responsibility to collect this information.

The 60 villages lay in four blocks - Nashik, Trimbak, Sinnar and Igatpuri. The team was based in Trimbak, and the villages lay in a 40 KM radius. Most of the terrain was made

of mountains and valleys. The team of 5 - Shailesh, Sunil, Dnyaneshwar and Harshal, along with Mr. More - often travelled about 100 KMs every day. They used one van and a set of bikes to reach the villages, conduct the test using tabs and return to Trimbak to upload the data from the tabs.

Conducting a tab based test was nothing new for the team. The routines to initialize the test, invigilate, and finally upload the data were well known. But, this time the tests were being conducted not in schools but in the villages where the children lived. Once a team member reached a village, he would have to communicate with the villagers and bring the children to one place. Although messages had been relayed through teachers and other contacts prior to their arrival, the team would often have to search for the children. Some had gone out of station with their families to work, others were working on their farms and still others were visiting relatives in near and far villages.

"We considered ourselves lucky if we found about 60% of the children from our list in a village"; said Mr. More. "One day, Harshal came back late, looking tired and dejected. He had gone around Karanjpada village but had not found a single child. After travelling about 100 kilometres through mountains and valleys, he was exhausted and the thought of going there again to look for the children was a task that made his heart heavy."



Researcher interviewing a student in Nashik district

Finding and bringing the children to a central location from the hamlets distributed across hills and valleys was one task that continued to pose problems. Sometimes the community was not cooperative, but after understanding their purpose or after seeing an official letter or after talking to local teachers, the villagers helped the team in many ways to conduct this massive undertaking. The process of testing was itself very revealing about the situations in which many of the children and their families lived. Out of school, most of the older children were either working or roaming around in the forests while the younger ones helped at home and played in the villages. These experiences highlighted the many roles that the schools played in the lives of these children and their families. For most people in the research team, these were eye opening moments as they showed the human stories behind the numbers which are reported in documents and research papers.

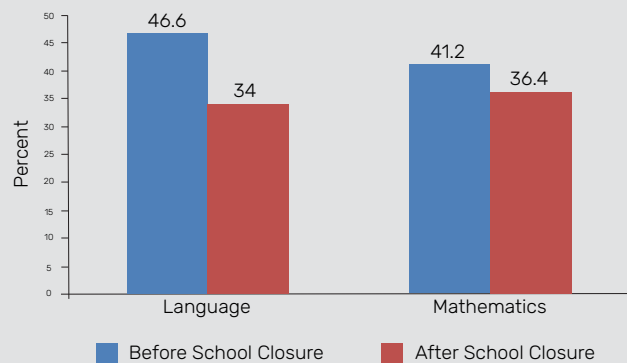
Understanding the Learning Loss

The assessments conducted by QUEST under the Anupad program cover various competencies in language and mathematics such as reading comprehension, writing, arithmetic operations, and word problems. The study on Learning Loss was conducted with a sample of 400 children selected from various Ashram Schools within the program. The graph below shows the average test scores of these children in language and mathematics, before and after school closure. The difference between these scores is considered as the 'Learning Loss' that children have incurred due to the school closure.

The learning loss that children suffered due to school closures was highest for language, about 27%. The language test conducted by QUEST included competencies like decoding, grammar and vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing. After further analysis, the team found that children had lost most in two areas: higher level reading comprehension and writing. This can perhaps be attributed to the environment in which these children live. Children in this

intervention were from tribal communities. Often, the parents of these children were either not literate or could not provide opportunities to read and write at home.

Learning Loss due to School Closure for a Sample of Children



Uncertainties and Plans

Understanding the learning loss of children due to such an extended closure of schools is just the first step. The next step is making a plan to mitigate this loss. From the data, the research team inferred that in language, the children had taken 22 weeks to learn what they had now lost due to the school closure. Assuming it would take about half the time to regain their competencies, the team planned for an 11 week intervention to teach reading comprehension and writing to about 200 children from the study. After this intervention, the team would conduct another assessment to check its effectiveness.

The team led by Mr. More began working with children from 5 villages and 3 schools in February 2021. The team members would visit the selected village or school and conduct sessions on reading comprehension and writing for children. However, after 3 weeks the work has been stalled yet again due to another lockdown. The team is trying to continue giving inputs to children via whatsapp. The challenges remain, and it is difficult to say whether the intervention will have the desired impact given the uncertain situation.

- Pranjal Koranne, with inputs from Rajendra More



Testing by QUEST team in Nashik district to measure learning loss

No. of children in Nashik district reached through online medium

News



QUEST featured in 'The Changemakers'

QUEST was featured as a partner organization of H T Parekh Foundation in 'The Changemakers', a documentary series by CNBC-TV18. QUEST's work in Early Childhood Education was highlighted in this episode which is available on this link - <https://bit.ly/3i8nIJI>



QUEST @ Dasra Philanthropy Week 2021

Dasra, a pioneer organization working on strategic philanthropy, organized the 'Dasra Philanthropy Week' in March 2021. Nilesch Nimkar (Director, QUEST) presented the journey of QUEST from a regular field level organization to a professionally managed NGO in one of the sessions titled 'Pay what it takes'. Sharing the platform online were renowned philanthropist Amit Chandra and representatives of Bridgespan and EdelGive Foundation, among others. The discussion highlighted the need for philanthropists to support the indirect, non-project costs of NGOs. The session is available on this link - <https://bit.ly/3kFc6yZ>

QUEST & Ed-Tech



Mandar Kulkarni conducting a workshop for QUEST team members in 2019

Our collaborators – Driya Interactive – Pathfinders in Ed-Tech

Learning online is a huge industry. Websites like Coursera and EdX offer courses in a variety of areas, from literature and mathematics to music and engineering. For younger children, there is a range of services, from an auction of online tutors to the famous Byjus. In the new normal of 2021, whether we are able to or not, we will need to use digital technology to teach and learn.

Finding Ed-Tech

In 2014, two young engineers in Pune, Mayura Dolas and Mandar Kulkarni started a company called Driya Interactive. The name was derived from 'indriya', the word for 'senses' in Sanskrit to reflect their idea to create digital experiences which were as real as possible. They began to work in the cutting edge field of motion sensors, virtual reality and augmented reality, the most commonly found applications of which are in gaming and experiential marketing.

Driya started developing interactive and gamified experiences for various brands, most of which involved customers interacting with 3D virtual models of a product to learn more about it. One day, they were walking to a

meeting in the mid-day sun and for a moment wished they could simply 'drag and drop' the sun under the horizon and they had an epiphany – they could create a virtual 3d model of the solar system which children could play with to understand different concepts in astronomy.

While the market for educational technology might be big, children in rural and tribal areas, learning in a regional language like Marathi are not the preferred customers of Ed-Tech companies. Driya took up the challenge of using technology for the regional language market in Maharashtra. Over the past few years Driya has been a technology partner for QUEST. Here is the story of their EdTech journey.

The duo decided to first explore the existing ed-tech interventions. They met teachers and students in variety of schools which did or did not use the technology at that time. They saw applications which tried to gamify learning to make it fun. For example, one application converted a simple multiple choice question into a cricket-like game where the child would have to hit the ball in front of the right answer. Now, while it had interactive elements, the question remained if technology was being used meaningfully to its true potential.

It Isn't Just About the Tech

Driya continued to grow in its field while Mayura and Mandar continued to explore the field of education. One of the very first organizations they came across was QUEST. They carried a bunch of fancy gadgets when they first travelled to Sonale. They met QUEST's director Nilesh Nimkar and demonstrated their creations which allowed the users to interact with technology in the most natural way possible. The duo was very excited about the possibilities of using such technology in making education more fun. "I thought we had brought really high-tech stuff to show the capabilities and hoped to solve some problems that QUEST might have faced. But, after our demo, Mr Nimkar seemed unimpressed. He shared his previous experience of trying to use technology for his needs which was not successful." recalled Mayura. "In his opinion the technology that could work as effectively as a teacher simply could not exist let alone the question of whether such intelligent technology can deal with the infrastructural limitations in the remote schools. He strongly believed that a simple chalk and paper-pencil based technology was working well enough." Mandar added.

However, Nilesh Nimkar seemed to have a slightly different plan for them. "All the great teachers that we have had, tested us to the limit. Mr Nimkar was no different. After almost convincing us that technology has no role to play in education, he subtly presented a problem statement which we jumped right on to!" Both Mandar and Mayura smiled as they remembered the incident. Nilesh Nimkar took them on a short tour of the campus to demonstrate QUEST's academic resources and pedagogic practices. He showed them a full wooden globe and a couple of others that had some slices cut out. He taught them latitudes and longitudes using those and mentioned in the end that the globe works great for understanding of certain geographical concepts but has

problems of logistics and precision. "Can you solve this problem with your technology?" Nilesh Nimkar asked. The duo nodded instantly.

Building from the Basics

The EdTech explorations of Driya and QUEST were just beginning with the 'globe prototype'. The prototype became a 'proof of concept' for both the educators at QUEST and techies at Driya that a meaningful integration of pedagogy and technology was possible.

Mayura and Mandar started visiting various program sites of QUEST. During each visit, they noted down the minute details of the team's daily routine and the challenges they faced. These notes became a great document for the need analysis and one task came out as a priority: In QUEST's level based learning program 'Anupad', comprehensive baseline and endline tests are conducted and the children are grouped according to their learning levels. Conducting the tests, checking the papers, entering the scores, correcting errors and analyzing the data was a time consuming process which could definitely be made more efficient through the use of technology.

It was soon apparent that developing a testing tool for children in Ashram Schools in Maharashtra was a completely unexplored area. The constraints of the field were severe and the scope of the features to be integrated was wide. There were a few options, like the use of QR codes, voting pads or OCR sheets. However, the Anupad test included various question types, such as multiple choice, match the columns, fill in the blanks, crosswords and even free response. The digital tool had to be flexible to allow all types of questions. On top of that, in many schools there was neither network available nor a charging station. Thus, their testing apparatus had to be mobile as well self-sufficient.



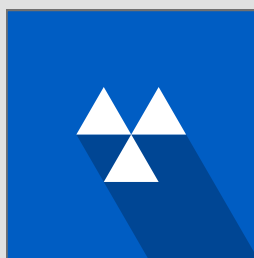
Mayura Dolas (right) explaining features of a tab-based test to a QUEST team member

The truly unexpected challenge was that some children had never used digital technology before. "Two boys even locked themselves in the toilet being afraid to use the tablets," Mandar said. "There was an Albino girl who was struggling with the brightness of tablet screen" Mayura added. There were many other insights from the UI testing such as not using the colors blue and green for opposite actions as some tribal children may identify them as 2 shades of same color. The team at Driya eliminated all such barriers before they developed the software, and it helped save hundreds of manhours which then could be utilized to roll out Anupad program faster.

Gatuvit : A path-finder

Anupad Testing Tool provided the momentum to design solutions for the other field requirements, one of which was teacher training. QUEST's Shikshak program had long term blended mode courses for teachers and short term training workshops. QUEST team was using Moodle to assemble the courses and WhatsApp to hold discussions with participants or to give them feedback. Their primary concerns were regarding usability of Moodle and organizing the responses in WhatsApp.

The team at Driya visualized an EdTech suite which would help in these particular issues while being flexible to be used across the platforms in all kinds of use cases. Usually a technology product is aimed at automating as many processes as possible. But team Driya agreed with QUEST's belief that a teacher's role in education is of utmost importance and can never be replaced. 'Gatuvit', the name they chose for this suite, means 'a path-finder' in Sanskrit.

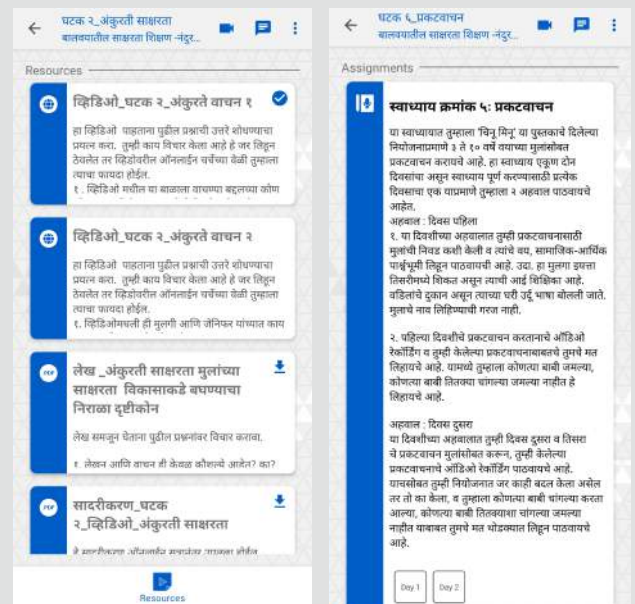


Gatuvit logo

A Learning Management System (LMS) requires several important features. It needs the capacity to upload and tag a pool of resources like articles, lesson plans, worksheets, videos, audios and other content like tests and assignments. The system also needs to provide an interface through which courses of different durations, having multiple units, using different resources can be created. For example, a course on 'Teaching Foundational

Literacy' will have 6 units and each unit will have at least one article in pdf, one video and one assignment. The assignment may include a forum discussion, or a written report or a practical component where participants have to submit a recording of their practice. Mentors assigned to each participant will then go through the assignments submitted, give appropriate feedback and give scores based on a rubric. The participants can be teachers or children but the mechanics of course creation, assembly and delivery would have to cater to all the possible needs.

"Most IT companies are interested in developing a product that they try to sell to as many customers as they can," Mayura said. "It's like stitching a shirt and asking people to fit themselves into it. What they don't realize is that education solutions need to be tailor-made by studying on-ground realities," Mandar added. For QUEST as well as Driya, Gatuvit was an opportunity to explore an area in which few players had the skills or the vision to compete. It was literally and figuratively, a path-finder!



Screenshots of Gatuvit app

A for-cause for-profit model

As Driya's focus was shifting to building EdTech products for rural population, propagating that culture inside the organization was the need felt by Mayura and Mandar. In early 2019, they held an EdTech design hackathon internally and put forward future plans in front of their team to make sure they have equally passionate people to contribute to the cause. "Without the humanities, great tech cannot exist," said Mandar referring to a quote by Tracy Chou, "Thinkers like Yuval Noah Harari and Triston Harris warn us about the potential of AI and the power that it lends to a present day software programmer. We need to make wise decisions."

The first stage in the development of Gatuvit began in February 2019. "It was a bootstrap process. We knew that we need to put enough time for field research and running pilots. Without ensuring the results we can't rush for returns. So investors were never an option" said Mayura. "But then you still need to attract the best talent to work on the product and offer them competitive benefits. That's the balanced path you have to walk - keep the cashflow running while working on your product by putting extra time and energy."

The beginning of 2020 was something that no one was prepared for. All the projects that brought the cashflow in stopped and the team at Driya had to work their way out. Sensing the impact that the pandemic may have on education, they folded their sleeves and began to work 24x7 on making Gatuvit a reality. While the whole world stopped, team Driya worked day and night in a hope to help in the cause they believed in. It was certainly a blessing in disguise.

Marrying Pedagogy and Technology

In April-May 2020, during the lockdowns, QUEST declared short term online courses for teachers under the Samjun Umjun program banner. It was apparent that Gatuvit app would be beneficial for these courses. Thus, there was little time to rigorously pilot test the different features of Gatuvit. After only a few internal pilots, the mobile application was launched on the play store.

The teams at QUEST and Driya were now facing a break-neck fire-fighting battle as new issues were raised by the learners and mentors while courses were being conducted. "You constantly need to listen to your users" said Mayura, "The kind of insights you get about where your product needs to improve are enormous when you observe how they interpret and interact with various functionalities."

"Easier the user interface gets, more complex the product architecture becomes." Mandar said, "But it's worth putting those efforts when you see the value your product is creating for its users."

Gatuvit is constantly evolving as it is used by learners and mentors. It now has age appropriate interfaces across the platforms, one even in the form of a WhatsApp interface. However, it makes sure that the teacher's role is the core of the complete learning process that any learner goes through. Gatuvit has now become an integral part of most of QUEST's programs.

It was a long journey for both Driya and QUEST to patiently test if technology can contribute in providing quality education to children. Now, both the organizations are moving ahead with their vision of marrying technology to appropriate pedagogy and create a lasting impact on the field of education.

- Pranjal Koranne, based on a detailed interview with Mandar Kulkarni & Mayura Dolas



Development

English Language Teaching Program

Several policy documents such as NCF (National Curriculum Framework) - 2005 recognize the high aspirational value accorded to learning of English from the early grades across India. However, it is increasingly evident from assessment reports such as ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) and NAS (National Achievement Survey) that the aspirations of the people in this regard yet remain unfulfilled.

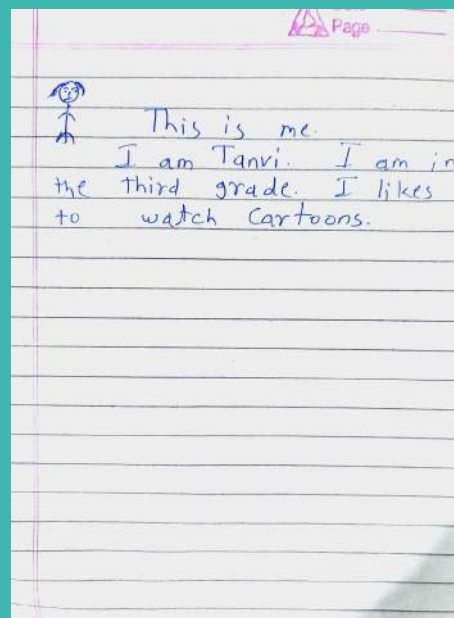
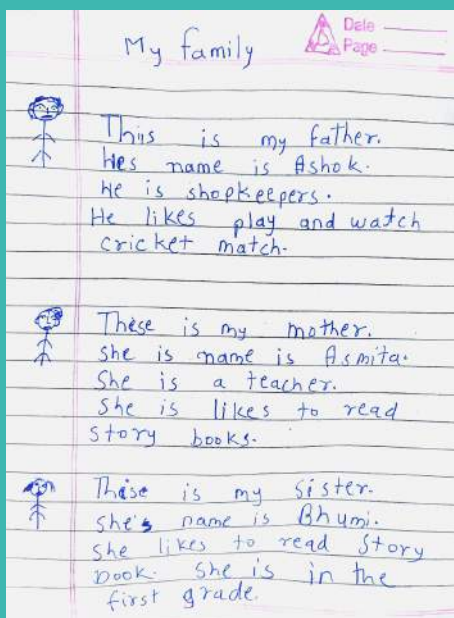
In Maharashtra, English as a subject has been made compulsory from grade 1 onwards some 20 years ago in the regional language (Marathi) medium schools. Yet, reflecting the national scenario, children are far away from attaining the desired proficiency or getting conversant with the language. There are several factors ranging from teachers being ill equipped to the system being unable to devise useful approaches to address the situation. This scenario added to the dilemma of the parents who were increasingly shying away from the government schools and enrolling their children in the private English medium schools which have mushroomed in every nook and corner of the state.

Since 2007 QUEST is known in the educational circles particularly in Maharashtra to have devised approaches and methods in first language literacy and numeracy. These approaches based on sound pedagogic principles have been successfully replicated as scalable models. Over the years, QUEST has received many requests from teachers and parents to find a solution to the problem of English Language teaching. Consequently, adhering to the organization's mission of serving the educational needs of children of under-served sections, QUEST is in the process of developing 'English Language Teaching Program' for the early graders studying in government

schools. In the first stage, sessions were conducted by QUEST team members in four schools in the Wada block of the Palghar district. The sessions were planned in such a way that they catered to all the critical aspects of the language learning, i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Around 100 sessions were conducted in 2019-20 with students of grade 2 and 3 from four schools totaling around 125 -150 children over a period of 9 months. We have observed a qualitative improvement in children in aspects like speaking and elementary reading. It has emerged that the children adapt to learning the second language if they have a sound proficiency of the first language. This inference also finds an echo in the documents like Focus group paper for English of the National Curriculum Framework (2005).

QUEST has also geared up to assemble a course for teachers to roll out this program on a wider scale. The course will have features such as contextual material viz. controlled text, bilingual material, illustrations, audio and audio visual resources, TLM, teacher manuals etc. QUEST possesses the necessary knowhow required to create such resources. Another essential feature will be that the course and the program will be continuously and comprehensively reviewed by experienced teachers and teacher educators and appropriate changes will be incorporated from time to time. It is aimed that the course will enable the teachers to teach and create an appropriate learning environment required for teaching English for the early grades in Marathi medium school. The lockdown has hampered the work to a certain extent but we are hopeful of rolling it out in the near future.

- Rohit Choudhary



A student from a ZP school in Wada Taluka writes in English after attending sessions by QUEST team.

Updates



QUEST's support for Vidyavedh, Hingoli

The Education Department & DIET, Hingoli launched a District Transformation program called 'Vidyavedh' in August 2020, to sustainably improve children's learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy. QUEST is a knowledge partner in this initiative and is committed to improving the quality of elementary education in the District through active participation of District Administration and meaningful engagement of the community.

Considering the pandemic situation, online orientation sessions were held for the government authorities and DIET trainers, followed by an online courses on Early literacy and numeracy for Grade 1 & 2 teachers of selected 'Model Clusters'.

QUEST team is exploring ways to engage with teachers of Grade 5 to 7 to prepare them to address the post-pandemic learning needs of children who are trailing behind in achieving the basic learning outcomes. Since the schools are closed, the team is also exploring reaching out to the children directly through online platforms.

Partners – Education Department & DIET Hingoli, EdelGive Foundation



QUEST team discussing the program with the Principal of DIET, Hingoli



#GoshtarangSuttiSpecial

The Goshtarang team was quick to realize that 'online' would become the 'new normal' during the lockdown. On March 22, 2020, #GoshtarangSuttiSpecial, an online storytelling activity via Facebook was started for the young audiences.

"We will upload stories, poems, songs ... parents and children can watch them together and do some fun activities based on them," said the introductory Facebook post.

Over the next 3 months, the Goshtarang Facebook page was buzzing with a wide variety of presentations! Stories by Indian and foreign authors, poems by well-known Marathi poets, songs from the Goshtarang archives... it was a treat for the audience!

Forty three posts shared on the Goshtarang Facebook page received 2,90,000+ views. Professional artistes, storytellers and ex-Goshtarang Fellows actively participated in narrating stories on video for children. Well-known persons from the Marathi theatre & film world such as Chinmay Kelkar, Lalit Prabhakar, Anita Date and Geetanjali Kulkarni were among the artistes who narrated stories. Our Ex-Goshtarang fellows Ruchika Khot, Santosh Gaikwad, Sagar Landage and Ganesh Jadhav also participated in this activity. Sadhana, Ayush, Divya, Vidya and Vikas, children who are frequently a part of Goshtarang activities at our Sonale campus, performed stories and songs in Marathi and in English, too.

#GoshtarangSuttiSpecial was quite popular, going by the views, likes and comments on Facebook. The responses also made us realize how necessary such a fun activity was for children and parents alike in the difficult period of lockdown.



Goshtarang Fellowship - a gap year

For the academic year 2020 – 2021, we had received 92 applications for the Goshtarang Fellowship Program. However, due to the school closure, there was no recruitment of new fellows. These applications will be considered for the academic year 2021–2022.

Goshtarang at a national webinar

The journey of Goshtarang was presented in a webinar organized by Applied Theatre India Foundation, Pune, and Indian Council for Cultural Research (ICCR), New Delhi. The title of the paper was 'Applying theatre to address the problems in early literacy of Tribal Children' and is available on the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TwD3yz9jK0>.

An online session about Goshtarang Fellowship was also conducted for the young theatre enthusiasts based in Pune at the 'Sangam Art Fest'.



Goshti Digital – a new step

During the lockdown, we reconnected online with all the batches of Goshtarang Fellows. We have planned an activity named 'Goshti – Digital', in which the ex fellows will narrate stories in video format. Seven fellows are working on presenting 30 stories published by well-known authors. These will be recorded and made available to public through QUEST's YouTube channel.

Collaboration with Pratham for Storytelling

To help children learn the art of storytelling, Goshtarang in collaboration with Pratham Education Foundation is designing film scripts based on the theme 'Effective ways of Storytelling'. These film scripts are being written in Marathi, targeting children of 10 to 14 age group. Ex Goshtarang Fellows have been involved in the script writing process.

- Vaibhav Lokur



Storytelling workshop - Team members from Pratham and QUEST



TMRE Fellowship - Training session in progress

One of QUEST's strategic priorities is 'to build a team of inspired professionals committed to enhancing the quality of education.' QUEST has been conducting courses and workshops for the professional development of teachers and teacher educators for many years. The team has felt a need for a long time to create a support system of mentors who can conduct courses and provide guidance to different groups of professionals working in the education sector, especially in rural areas.

Given this background, QUEST announced the Tarabai Modak Rural Education Fellowship (TMRE Fellowship) in 2019. The objective of this fellowship was to nurture young people interested in the field of rural education, and to create a community of trained professional 'teacher mentors' who can provide support to teachers in elementary education.

This was an experimental initiative, and the team didn't know what response to expect. It was therefore a pleasant surprise when we received over 90 applications for the first batch! Out of these, 12 persons were further shortlisted for a 2-day workshop in Sonale. The intention was to expose the applicants to the remote location of QUEST. In the workshop, each applicant had to read an article on pedagogy and present it to a panel, conduct a lesson with children and prepare a research design based on given data. Here, the applicants got a taste of the rigour of the training and work expected.

Five persons were selected for the fellowship. They were post graduates from diverse fields such as Environment Management, Sanskrit and Social Work. Only one of them had completed her M. Ed. and had prior teaching experience.

The training started in November 2019. The theory and practical sessions were arranged back-to-back - training sessions at the QUEST campus for a week, and practical

sessions on field in the following week. This arrangement helped the Fellows to consolidate their new learning by trying it out in the field immediately.

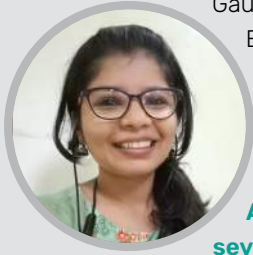
In the training, the fellows were exposed to the pedagogy of early literacy and numeracy. During the practical sessions in Anganwadis and Zilla Parishad Schools, they were able to experience the unique challenges of the education system in rural and tribal areas. They were slowly making forays into learning how to teach the higher grades, when the lockdown started. The Fellows had to return to their hometowns. In the 'new normal' situation, the Fellows completed their training online, along with an introductory course on Research Methodology.

Later, as QUEST started using the online medium successfully to conduct teacher training sessions, the management asked the fellows if they would like to join QUEST as trainers and teacher mentors. All of them agreed and are now working full time, guiding project teams, conducting workshops and mentoring teachers. Interacting with various stakeholders is giving them a fresh perspective on all the theory they learnt in the Fellowship. They have integrated themselves quite easily with other QUESTians and are handling the responsibilities with conviction.

We are happy that the first batch of TMRE Fellowship has provided us young and enthusiastic trainers and mentors – a much needed resource in different QUEST programs. But above all, we are happy that through this experiment, we have successfully created a cadre of trained young people who are invested in rural education!

- Anupama Joshi

Meet the Fellows



Gauri Rane had completed her MSc in Physics and was a visiting faculty in Vidyalankar College of Engineering, Mumbai. She joined the TMRE Fellowship to make an impact in the field of education. In her Fellowship field work, she got an opportunity to teach children in an Anganwadi. She is now a part of QUEST's Palavee program which trains Anganwadi sevikas in delivering the Early Childhood Education curriculum of the state. She says, **"During the Fellowship, I read many articles on Early Childhood Education, and tried out those ideas and activities in the Anganwadi. That experience comes in handy now, when I have to explain to an Anganwadi sevika how to conduct an activity and how it would benefit the children."**

Madhusudhan Bangar had completed MSW and was working with tribal and rural populations on health and nutrition. He joined the Fellowship because he believed that education could bring a positive change in society. He liked to imagine a world where children would be happy to go to school. Madhusudan is now involved in designing and conducting courses for teachers and he is also mentoring teachers as a part of QUEST's Anupad program. He says, **"In the Fellowship, I slowly figured out what is required to become a good teacher. There is not much difference between learning and teaching. If I can explain how I learnt something, it works! My training in the Fellowship has helped me to plan the sessions well, and I am able to conduct training sessions confidently for the teachers."**



Roshana Kathole had taught for some years in Madhyamik Vidyalaya, Dadhre (Taluka Wada) before she joined QUEST. Due to her experience as a teacher, she joined the fellowship not only as a Fellow but also as a co-trainer. She says, **"I had the experience of teaching children. But training adults was a big responsibility. If I had to read an article with the Fellows, I had to think in advance what questions they may ask, and how I should answer them. Since the Fellows came from different backgrounds, I learnt a lot from them as well. Thanks to the Fellowship, the gap between me and technology has reduced. I have become a better trainer with this experience."** Roshana is a member of QUEST's academic team now, and works as a teacher educator.

Sharduli Joshi had obtained an M Phil in Sanskrit and was working as a teacher for 3 years. She joined the fellowship to understand the ground realities of education and the challenges faced by children while learning. She says, **"During the Fellowship, learning how to teach language and math required a lot of unlearning on my part. What I enjoyed the most was the freedom to learn at one's own pace, setting one's own deadlines and delivering the work to the best of one's ability. Every day brings different challenges in QUEST, and it has brought many positive changes in me as a person. The process of learning and teaching is extremely rewarding."**



Vaibhavi Shirke had received a master's degree in Environment Management and had dreams of becoming an IFS officer. But when that dream did not work out, she applied for the Fellowship to explore the education sector as a potential career option. As a Fellow, she visited an Anganwadi for the first time. Now, she works with QUEST's Palavee program and is involved in training Anganwadi sevikas in delivering Early Childhood Education curriculum. She says, **"I have understood the importance of early childhood education, and I want to make every effort to convey it to the Anganwadi workers and parents in villages through the Palavee program."**

NEP 2020, Foundational Literacy and insights from QUEST's work

The National Education Policy which was announced in July 2020 lays a lot of emphasis on Early Literacy. The policy envisages the age group of 3 to 8 years as a foundational stage for education, during which a strong basis of literacy education should be laid. To achieve any success in this endeavour, it would be critical to define Early Literacy and to have clarity and consensus on its objectives.

Literacy education – the prevalent perception

As per the prevalent perception of literacy education, reading and writing are considered skills. People believe that if children do not know the alphabet or barakhadi, they cannot be called 'literate'. The traditional sequence of teaching reading and writing is – first the parts of letters, then the letters themselves, then barakhadi and then words, sentences and paragraphs – in that order. To learn any skill, it has to be practiced repeatedly. Hence, in this skill-based approach, the classroom interaction revolves around tasks like repeated practice of standing and sleeping lines and copy-writing individual letters of the alphabet one by one.

Emergent Literacy Approach – a developmental perspective to literacy

The 'Emergent Literacy approach' proposed in the 1960s views literacy as an integral part of children's overall development. It proposes that children need to develop some critical ideas related to printed language and the process of reading and writing much before the formal introduction of the letters of the alphabet. Some of these ideas are as follows:

1. Written language is just another form of the spoken language. What we speak can be written and what we write, we can read.
2. Somebody writes a book and when we read it, we try to understand what the person has written.
3. Writing has many uses. For example, to make lists, to write letters, to label objects, etc.
4. Spoken language contains sentences. Sentences contain words. Words contain sounds.
5. It is possible to manipulate the sounds in words. It is possible to play with them.

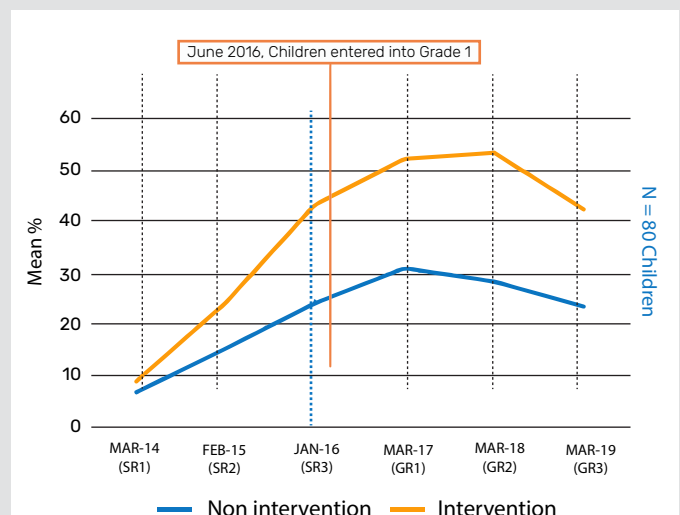
If the adults around a child use the written word in various

ways, the child can pick up important clues about reading and writing, much before the formal introduction of the letters of the alphabet. However, children who come from homes which are not literate have to depend solely on the pre-school to learn these ideas. In such cases, the preschool plays a very important role. Many techniques have been developed all over the world to teach these ideas to preschoolers. Any good quality literacy instruction programme cannot afford to miss these well-established insights.



QUEST's experience of using Emergent Literacy Approach

QUEST has implemented a literacy programme based on the Emergent Literacy Approach in more than 1,700 Anganwadis across Maharashtra. We designed flexible but effective classroom activities for literacy education based on this framework. We tracked the achievement of Anganwadi children during the intervention years and continued to track the same children even after they had moved to primary school; and compared their performance with a control group.



After three years of intervention we saw a significant difference of about 19 percentage points on school-readiness test between the control and intervention groups in 2016. This gap persisted even after the intervention ended and the children moved to primary school. This clearly shows that early intervention with a developmentally appropriate literacy instruction has a long-term impact on children's learning.

Our recommendation based on our learnings

To sustain the effect of the early literacy input in the Anganwadis, we believe that it is necessary to continue literacy and numeracy input in Grades 1 and 2. These insights from small scale experiments need to be taken into account while evolving a large scale implementation plan for the foundational stage proposed in NEP. However, a word of caution: It would be a welcome change to extend the informality of preschool to Grades 1 and 2. But it would be detrimental for children if the prevalent skill-based literacy education and evaluation of primary schools is brought down to preschools.

What should be included in Teacher Training?

To bring the Emergent Literacy approach into the classrooms, we need to include the following in teacher training programs –

1. Teachers must be acquainted with the theoretical framework of Emergent Literacy and the recent research in the field. Merely using the activities in the classroom without an understanding of theory will not bring desired results. Creating a state-level framework will help communicate the exact meanings of certain concepts to all the teachers.

2. Teachers need to work on specific skills to conduct

activities like participatory reading and read aloud. Our experience shows that teachers need regular guidance and practice for this, which needs to be factored into the training programs.

3. Children's literature occupies a key position in the Emergent Literacy approach. Teacher training must include information on how to set up a small library and how to provide a rich reading experience to children.

4. Using children's home language and their local environment is extremely important in literacy development. While a single framework may be developed at the State level, teachers need clarity on how to use it flexibly to bring children's home language and local culture into the classroom.

5. Teachers require reference material on the nature of Indian scripts, their strengths and how to use those strengths while teaching. They also need guidance on using specific teaching methods to implement a planned yet flexible literacy program in the classroom.

There is a clear expectation in NEP 2020 that all school-going children must become proficient in reading-writing by 2025. Creating a state level framework and training teachers to implement it are important steps. However, if parents continue to go by the current perception of literacy as a 'skill', their home environment will not be conducive to the teachers' efforts in school. NEP 2020 recommends that all educated persons should see literacy as a mission and participate in the process. Therefore it is even more pertinent that the Emergent Literacy approach and its theoretical framework should be popularized far and wide in the society.

- Nilesh Nimkar, Founder Trustee and Director

Looking back...



My Journey in the Social Field

I had never imagined till I completed my graduation that working in the social field would become my profession for life. Since I grew up in a small village, I had little or no idea about the social field. For me, a 'social worker' meant an old person wearing khadi, who leads a simple life and makes a lot of sacrifices. After giving my final exam for graduation, I landed a job at Grammangal. I decided to give it shot, more as 'timepass'. Grammangal is founded by Padmashree Anutai Wagh, in Aine, Taluka Dahanu, and works in the field of education.

In the early days, I worked as a school teacher. I had no prior experience of teaching. But I thought, 'what does it take to teach small children?' I soon realized how difficult it was. I tried to learn how to teach, but I was not able to continue for long because I was made the manager of the organization. I had to look after all the facilities on the campus, the accounts and construction. Again, I had no prior experience or training in any of these. I was learning on the job, which was quite an uphill task.

During those days I often reflected, why is our work called 'social work'? Why do the visitors from big cities find the work so great? Why do they appreciate it so much that we are working in remote areas? Since I had grown up in a remote village and was born in a 'marginalized' community, I was accustomed to the lack of facilities or the remoteness of places.

The organization was growing, I was entrusted with new responsibilities and I had a good rapport with my colleagues. Even with all these I didn't really think about choosing this field as a career. Sometimes I would get confused – on the one hand, there was a need to look for work that paid well, and on the other hand, there was this organization which fostered my personality development but didn't pay much. What should I choose? Well, I chose the second option, and I have not regretted it even once in the last 25 years!

Grammangal worked primarily in education, and also on village development to an extent. Many experts would

come and present their ideas on rural development. They would explain different models of how our organization should work to help local people and enrich their lives. But I would always wonder – we were grossly underpaid ourselves and were struggling to make ends meet – how could they expect us to work for the betterment of others? Despite this dichotomy, I continued to work in this field. The only reason for this was the opportunities provided by that organization for personal development. I was able to study the work of many social organizations. I got a chance to listen to experts from many fields and to work with some of them. I travelled to many parts of Maharashtra. In short, this job expanded the scope of my thinking which the formal education in my village had never done. I developed the ability to adapt to any given situation and thrive.

After working with Grammangal for 12 years, I decided to start working with QUEST in 2008. QUEST is headquartered in my village, Sonale. With so much work experience, I was confident that I could help QUEST to strike roots in this area.

QUEST works to enhance the quality of education. When the organization was founded in 2007, we recruited some local youth and trained them to teach children of grades 1 to 4 in centres which we call as Balbhavans. While working with these children we realized that when children come from Anganwadi to grade 1, they have had little or no preparation to enter school. We were spending the initial months in the Balbhavan on making the children 'school ready'. In 2008, we decided to start conducting some ECE activities in Anganwadis in the villages where Balbhavans were operating. Within one year, we could see a positive impact. We were getting the support of local people – the village education committee, the Sarpanch, head master of the local school, teachers and Anganwadi Sevikas. I felt that if we continue to do constructive and quality work in my area, the local community would definitely appreciate it. However, some unforeseen challenges soon emerged.

In 2009, we started facing some opposition from a local political leader. False allegations and complaints about the organization were sent to the ICDS department. Since I was the local face of QUEST, it became my responsibility to solve these problems. I was handling these issues my way, and I must admit that I made a few mistakes as well, owing to the stress caused by these challenges.

I discussed the issue with the President and Director of QUEST, and we decided that in order to work with the education system, it was important for us to establish good connections with the local administration as well as local political leadership. We chalked out a strategy. The first one was to invite local leaders, political figures and journalists to the organization and explain the work to them. The second was to get cooperation and support from the district administration. QUEST was founded with the objective of working closely with the public education system, hence it was imperative to work with the administration. With some reluctance, I started visiting the government offices and soon saw the advantages and impact.

In one of the meetings, the ICDS Officer Mr Pimple invited us to take up responsibility of working with the entire Parali-2 project in Wada block – a total of 113 Anganwadis. Though we had worked with only 8-10 Anganwadis till then, we accepted this offer and did some pioneering work in those 113 Anganwadis. We developed a strong model of improving ECE in Anganwadis. QUEST's Palavee program was born out of this experience. Today, we are working with over 1800 Anganwadis in 5 districts and we hope to expand the work to 5000 Anganwadis in the coming 3 years. I smile to myself when I remember the struggles of running 8-10 Balbhavans and Anganwadis in the initial days!

QUEST's work was expanding, but we had no idea that we needed to work on institution building. We had received funding from Tata Trust for a project in the first year. After completion of one year they sent an auditor to audit the project. During that audit, we realized that we needed to strengthen the admin and accounts departments of the

organization. If we wanted to continue the work in a professional manner, we needed to bring in several improvements. In the next 6 months, we worked on strengthening the admin and accounts systems. When the same auditor returned after 6 months, he appreciated our efforts. After this experience, I confidently faced the audits by other funders. I was able to see firsthand what it meant to build a professional organization.

In the early days, it was quite tiresome to device a system, to try it out and to insist that the team members should follow it. Personally, I had to learn many new skills. But soon I saw proof of how good systems can sustain work expansions with minimum resources. I had never imagined that I would be able to use information technology to such an extent in my life! In the beginning, it was a big challenge for me to send an email using a computer. I used to wonder why I should send a report by email to a colleague who is sitting at the next table. But our director was insistent on using these skills. These skills came in very handy during the Covid lockdown. QUEST may be based in a remote village, but our team is well versed with modern technology. We were able to use the online medium to reach out to the scores of intended beneficiaries spread far and wide.

I have been working with QUEST for 14 years. Due to QUEST's clearly defined vision and well thought out plans to achieve it, the work is expanding a lot. While working in this organization, I am learning something new continuously. Even after working in the social field for almost 25 years, I have not felt any fatigue or slackness that may come with age. When I speak to my college friends, I realize what a changed person I am today. My entry into this field was by accident, but I was fortunate to meet the right people at the right time. I came from a farmer's family in a small village, but I was exposed to many diverse things while interacting with these people. Everything that I have learnt during this journey has enriched my life.

- Nitin Vishe, Senior Manager, Programs and Government Liaisoning



Our supporters and partners

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Several individuals, organizations and foundations have supported us over the years, and many of them continued to do so in 2020-21. QUEST is accredited by Credibility Alliance under Desirable Norms; Guidestar platinum certification holder; registered with National CSR Hub of TISS.

Governance

Board of trustees

President - Manoj Karyekar

Director - Nilesh Nimkar

Trustees - Aparna Bhole, Ketan Gala, Kailas Kulkarni, Nitin Nimkar, Dr Jayashree Shinde
(Nilesh Nimkar and Nitin Nimkar are brothers)

In 2020-21, the Board of Trustees met four times, on May 31, 2020, August 15, 2020, December 13, 2020 and January 26, 2021. All the meetings were held online, given the covid pandemic and lockdown.

Atul Kulkarni, who was a Founder Trustee and President of the Board since QUEST's inception, retired in February 2021.

Transparency Disclosures

No remuneration, fees or compensation was paid to any Board Member in their capacity as Board Members, except to the Director, for his academic contribution as a resource person for workshops and other activities. The costs for his domestic travel and lodging-boarding for workshops and other activities during the year were borne by QUEST through project funds.

There was no international travel during the year.

Legal Compliances

QUEST complies with all statutory requirements of the Income Tax act and Foreign Contribution Regulation Act. All donor requirements are duly complied with.

Honorarium distribution as on March 31, 2021

Monthly Payment + allowances to persons working Part-Time/Full Time (in rupees)	Men	Women	Total
Below 15000	2	4	6
15001-25000	14	6	20
25001-50000	12	10	22
Above 50000	4	2	6
Total	32	22	54

Financials

Balance sheet as at 31st March 2021

PROPERTY AND ASSETS	Rs.
Land (Corpus Fund)	4,861,696
Immovable Properties (At Cost)	
Building and infrastructure (Resource Centre)	1,141,440
Building and Infrastructure (Dadhare)	548,968
Container Classroom	1,906,008
Fixed Assets	2,152,331
Investments	74,571,715
Advances	1,063,862
Cash and Bank Balances	11,610,722
Total Rs.	97,856,742
FUNDS & LIABILITIES	Rs.
Trust Corpus Funds	58,575,138
Other Earmarked Funds	
Building and infrastructure (Resource Centre)	1,141,440
Building and Infrastructure (Dadhare)	548,968
Container Classroom	1,906,008
Fixed Assets Funds	2,152,331
Unspent Project Grants	20,746,829
Liabilities	255,561
Income and Expenditure Account	12,530,468
Total Rs.	97,856,742

(Figures taken from the audited accounts of 2020-21)

Income and Expenditure Account for the year ending 31st March, 2021

INCOME	Rs.
Interest accrued/realised	3,080,351
Donations in Cash or Kind	1,973,396
Grants	46,579,832
Income from other sources	388,280
Total Rs.	52,021,859
EXPENDITURE	Rs.
Establishment Expenses	1,068,417
Remuneration to Trustees	1,318,363
Audit Fees	70,800
Contribution and Fees	436,147
Depreciation	1,207,941
Amount transferred to Unspent Project Grants Specific Funds/Grants a/c	20,746,829
Expenditure on Objects of the trust	24,125,119
Surplus	3,048,243
Total Rs.	52,021,859

(Figures taken from the audited accounts of 2020-21)

DETAILED FINANCIALS - http://admin.quest.org.in/upload/QUEST_Audit_Report_2020-2021.pdf

Contact us



Instagram

https://www.instagram.com/quest_ngo/



Website: www.quest.org.in



Youtube

<https://www.youtube.com/user/questeduvideos>



Email: quest@quest.org.in



Twitter

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Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/QUESTorg/>
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Cover photo: Nilesh Nimkar

At the Sonale campus of QUEST, these two boys were checking the QUEST logo, and one boy was telling the other in the local language, **"This is Q!"**