

What is offered at Aditi Learning Centre

at Village Khusgaon, near Pune, Maharashtra, India

as told by Mary D'Souza, 2018

Aditi Learning Centre in village Khusgaon, **is an invitation to women, of whatever age, to come and complete their formal schooling and experience a sense of new ownership of their physical and emotional space and wellbeing.**

The Centre provides space and facilities that women are invited to participate in to get their class 10 and 12 examinations complete. There are five teachers and a librarian who facilitate the learning process. The learners are at the Centre from 11:30am to 3:30pm, allowing them to continue to participate in family chores that their family depends on, including cooking, cleaning, drawing water, washing clothes and caring for the siblings.

Why education?

Looking at the complex issues we face in the world today, any development effort (requires informed and engaged participation of all people. Education is a powerful tool to allow for responsible, compassionate and caring engagement with life.



Why women?

Based on the belief that if women participated in the development process of themselves, their families and communities, the path to change would be more wholesome and more efficient. Education is intended to give them the understanding and skills that allow this change to take place. The experience of educated women (whether young or old) being an asset to the family and to the community, is what is envisioned

Why are women not given the same opportunities as the men?

Women have for centuries been held back by mental paradigms of suppression and fear, and not seen as worth the educational investment. Most girls who stop studying come from families where they hold the culturally prevalent paradigm that daughters/women are second class citizens. This leads to a priority for most parents and extended family to get the young woman married. Those who hold this perspective therefore see no point in investing time or resources in educating women. *The young women buy into the story as they see no alternative.*

Another reason girls stop studying in school is that they have never learned the basics. There are many who do not know how to read, write or do basic mathematics in class 6 or 7 or 8. Then school becomes a drag for them. Then she may decide she does not want to study further and wishes to stay home. Many fail in class 8 or 9 and choose not to continue their studies. For those re-engaging in the learning process, there may have been a break of anywhere from 3 to 17 years.

What is at the heart of this educational effort?

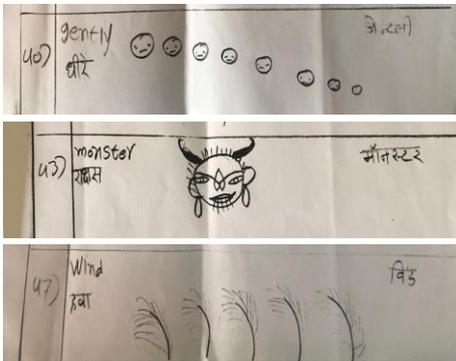
This effort is to empower women to be informed thinkers and actors in society. The Maharashtra State Education Board's curriculum provides the spine of the formal program. Students however are introduced to a series of modules outside of the curriculum including:

- The structure, function and capacity of the brain
- Study methods to understand, synthesize and remember data
- Awareness about sexuality and personal hygiene

The Approach

Start with the basics

Most of our students have had learning difficulties. Even if a student has finished class 8, we often need to work on the very basics of counting, addition, subtraction in mathematics and alphabets, vowels, writing and reading in Marathi.



Snippets from a pictorial dictionary created by Bubli (a student) as a learning tool for her English lessons.

What are the real questions an educator struggles with?

The curriculum add-ons are based on questions and struggles that learners bring to the table.

Some of the questions are:

- Is marriage a security for my future?
- How do I handle the changes in my body?
- Do I really have a voice?
- If I succeed in class 12, what does it really give me?
- Can I trust my dreams?

To address contemporary issues that the community faces, we engage in discussions around media, literature and film that present social issues and taboos of our culture today. Here are examples of areas explored at the Centre to deepen awareness and provide life education:

Understanding the complexity of poverty in our country. Nandini Oza, author of the book ***Ladha Narmadecha***, presented her experience on opposing the Sardar Sarovar dams. The emphasis was on understanding how dams have not addressed the real issues of poverty but have added to the displacement of large numbers of people and the destruction of the biodiversity of regions around the dams.

Am I also responsible for the garbage and the increased use of plastic in and around me? This year a four-day module was conducted on understanding the garbage situation of the world, the nation, the neighbourhood and their family. The module concluded with 30 students and teachers initiating composting efforts in their homes and reducing the use of plastic.

Sexuality and our bodies. Every year a module on sexuality is conducted to help young women understand their bodies and the transition to adulthood. Initially this came as a response to their confusion over how to handle male attention in their environments and their own interest in attracting male attention.

Expressing through diverse art forms.

During her time at Aditi, the learner is encouraged to participate in writing essays, poems and stories, and to engage in dance and drama events. Every student is encouraged to participate. Students transform from meek, voiceless individuals to characters in the drama.



Exposure to people who bring different perspectives and experience.

This year two unusual visitors to the centre interacted with our students



Aarti Halbe presentation on Kutch, India and its culture to the students.

Respected Hiroshige Kato of Kasen Pottery in Japan interacted with the learning community in sharing the history of pottery in Japan and demonstrating their approach to pottery. The Kato family were potters to the royal family of Nagoya castle. He is of the twelfth generation of Kato potters.

Arpita Gaidhune, a Student of Baul music and spiritual tradition did a two-hour presentation to the learning community.

Other presenters at Aditi were

- Jenny Wiegel from Nicaragua and her work as a development worker
- John Burbidge and Bruce Robertson on The Spectrum of Sexuality
- Aarati Halbe on her work with the people of Kutch
- Vandana Bokhil on Women Change Agents of Maharashtra
- Raymond Spencer on why it is important to involve families in the education process

Other Programs Offered at the Aditi Learning Centre

Basic literacy and mathematics

Five days a week, a two-hour program is conducted for children who are out of school and are first time learners. The intent is to provide them with the basics that allow them to go to the schools run by the local government. They are given a mid-day meal and



donors have contributed to giving food subsidies to encourage their regular participation in the program.



To have them come regularly for a program is a herculean task. A wedding or a festival in a neighbouring town or a birth of a baby in the community is reason enough to not come to the Centre. They come from minority communities whose parents are dependent on seasonal labour for their economic wellbeing. Sending children to school is often not a priority for them as the children can help earn money or run the household while the parents work.

This program is also offered to children of migrant labour who come to the villages around Kamshet to participate in the production of bricks. Their time at the Centre offers a space for them to be children and explore their freedom of expression and play.

Potali Program

This program is for parents of children who are between the ages of 0 to 3 years. The thrust of the program is to help parents create a positive environment in the home and neighbourhoods for children and to interact with children for their comprehensive development.

Eight teams of practitioners, with two in each team, work in the designated neighbourhoods. Each team works with 14 to 20 families for three months. The teams expose parents to 12 distinct aspects of child care. Since this program was initiated in 2012, over a thousand families have participated in the program.



The impact of this program has been seen in the diet of the children, in shifting family paradigms to value the girl child, in helping parents stop physical disciplining of children, in parents interacting with their children by singing songs, by reading stories and allowing children to interact with other children in the neighbourhood.

A network of 17 “books-in-a-box” library was initiated.

Using the network of eight Potali staff, six Aditi Learning Centre teachers and three students, around 1,000 books for children and parents have been curated and

distributed to 17 locations. This was initiated February 5, 2018. A review is yet to take place; but initial reports indicate that children and parents are enthusiastic about the opportunity to read books. The system for stocking and exchanging the books is simple. The librarians take a few books and exchange them whenever they wish to.

Programs for Making Our Environment Carbon Neutral

Reforestation



Planting trees in the campus around Aditi Learning Centre has been a priority. All trees that have been planted are native to the region. In May 2016, 1,300 trees were planted in 400 square meters using the Miyawaki approach. The Miyawaki approach is the work of Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki. His approach to grow forests, ensures 10 times growth, 30 times density of trees, 100 times of biodiversity and is 100 percent organic.

This reforestation effort and our effort to keep the area free of pesticides and chemical fertilisers has brought about a positive impact on the bio-diversity on the campus. The growth of the forest encouraged three other experiments in Pune at Chinmaya Mission (2,000 trees), a private property in Hinjewadi planted 500 trees last year and L &T, a large construction company in a nearby industrial town has also planted 1,300 trees around their plant.



Biogas

On the campus are two biogas units that generate cooking fuel from green waste. This is to reduce the use of liquid petroleum gas.

Solar energy

The Centre runs and operates solely on solar energy.

Unanswered Questions Faced Today

What after completing class 12? This is a question often asked by well-wishers. Most graduates get married soon after the completion of class 12. Some have gone on to do a diploma in education or to complete their Bachelor of Arts or Commerce as external students.

How does one get them to be economically independent? A clear path to economic independence would be a great advantage but this is not offered at Aditi.

How do we encourage the learner responsible for her own learning? Students come from an eight kilometer radius of the centre in village Khusgaon. When paddy is planted or harvested, they are free to stay home. For many families, women engaging in these activities are critical to the economic health and wellbeing of the family for the entire year. While we give the learners freedom and the flexibility of attendance, we at the same time want them to take greater responsibility for their learning by attending the classes regularly and take on expanding and deepening their knowledge. Attendance is one symbol of discipline and commitment to learning. At present we do not regulate attendance.

Scattered Impact: Where we are today? The impact of the program varies from individual to individual. Each person is affected differently. Each one works through the complexities of all the ropes that hold them back. The learners who come to study at Aditi for class 10 and 12 do not stay long enough to explore what changes within them. At the send-off event the learners often remark that they experience no partiality or bias in the class room. They also remark that the facilitators take great care in explaining complex material to them and have patience to work with them till they understand the material.

In March and April of 2017 a nine-week creativity program was held. For the duration of this program the whole community of teachers and learners are treated as one group of learners. They were exposed to a medley of programmes which included reading of the book Jonathan Livingston Seagull by Richard Bach, learning embroidery, exposure to origami, facilitated discussions on the key challenges faced by women in society, Marathi grammar, folk stories from India and Indonesia, and creating a pictorial dictionary of English word.

Our two male teachers, Lahu Ghogaje and Milind Khandare learned embroidery. Lahu embroidered a dress for his daughter. Milind embroidered a cotton shopping bag. This April and May they worked on learning crochet. These steps taken by these two men are as important for the teachers as they are for Aditi's learners. As men, they are expanding their learning process to include skills which are customarily seen as "feminine". In learning to embroider and in learning crochet they are adventurous learners who are not afraid of making mistakes or of being teased.

Ms. Nandini Bhosale and Ms Namrata Khandare talk about how the book Jonathan Livingston Seagull influenced their decisions of what they would do during their May vacations in 2017. Namarata went back to her mother's village and catalysed the planting of 300 trees. This meant working with the local community, local banks and the political structure. Nandini started a library in the neighbourhood for children to read. The major obstacle she overcame was the association of reading books as being equal to studying and school. This was overcome by reading stories to the children and then conversing about the story. Some parents have also become involved in the process.

On hearing about these initiatives Ms Pratiba Bhandare has started a study session in her home for women in her slum neighbourhood to begin studying towards

completing class 10. The twenty women attending the class are at various stages of the learning. There are those who have no memory of the alphabet they were taught as children to those who discontinued their studies in class 8. The class starts at 8 pm in the evening and is held five days a week.

Support

Aditi Learning Centre and students have been supported by many individuals and organizations.

Volunteer Support

- **Nayan Kulkarni** has provided leadership for all the educational efforts since its inception.
- **Neelam Oswal** has volunteered counselling efforts for many years.
- **The Jhaveri family (Pankaj and Teresa)** has been supporting the mid-day meals for the children who are first generation learners and the mid-day snack for students.
- Volunteer support has also come from the following individuals as resource persons and facilitators: **Asha Sathe, Deepa Lagoo, Vandana Bhokil, Vidya Bal, Neha Singh, Nivedita Kulkarni, Priyadarshan, Nihal Thete, Sadhana and Sudhakar Kasture, Hema Ambiker (Homeopathic physician), Dr. Prajakta Chhabra**

Organizational and Financial support

- **Fiserv** has provided financial support to the Potali program and the Mobile Library
- **Saama** has provided financial support for the Potali effort
- **Kishor Mitra** has continued to provide structural support to the Potali and Library programs.
- **Cyprian and Mary DSouza family** have supported all other programs through the **Aditi Learning Centres Foundation Trust.**

Creative writing piece by Laxmi (Class 9)

My Best Friend

*My mother is my best friend
because she understands me.
Without telling her anything
she understands what is in my mind.
I can tell her anything without hesitating.
There is no pressure from her on me.
She encourages my education.
Because of all this
my mother is my best friend.*

