

A New Education Model In Assam Is Using Games Like Snakes And Ladders To Make Learning Fun

"It is the students and their smiling faces, some who are extremely inquisitive and others who show their enthusiasm and eagerness to learn, that motivates me to come to school every day," expresses the headmaster of a government primary school from Morigaon District in Assam.

The narrative is, however, not the same for all and a few other teachers from the same school express the limited scope for innovation and creativity in their assigned roles as primary school teachers. Some say there is very little that inspires or motivates them to try and innovate new ways of engagement with children. What then, is the reason that teaching as a profession or the overall education system in India is so unappealing? What are the factors and facets that deserve immediate attention so as to shift the education system from looking so bleak?

At a time when a major chunk of the student community goes hullabaloo over the soaring cut-off list in Delhi University every year, it is perhaps also important to shift our attention to the very foundation years of school education in India and the many realities that continue to challenge us.

In a remote part of Assam's Morigaon district, a region that faces the wrath of the perennial floods every year, issues are manifold. Teachers and students commuting to school on makeshift rafts, and the school remaining shut for months during floods are quite common. However, the challenges, as far as the education system is concerned in the state of Assam, are not simply in relation to times of natural calamities and disasters. What then is the situation on regular days and what does a normal day in one of these primary schools look like?

As one walks past the corridors of these schools, teachers taking lessons in the same old traditional ways through rote learning is a common sight. Schools having a multi-graded system where children of several classes sit in one single classroom, either due to lack of infrastructure or teachers, are also very common. One should not be surprised to find a rod or a baton in most classes, although corporeal punishment is an offence and strictly banned. In the light of the above, there is indeed very little that has been done in order to bring a holistic transformation as far as primary school education is concerned, despite a lot of public and private investment on the same.

The approach towards education in India has been more so looked through a very narrow lens of either equating it with teaching or simply attending school. Einstein had once rightly said, *"Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school,"* and it is time India gears itself towards a much-needed shift.

The Akikaran Model

A recent intervention through the works of North East Centre for Equity Action on

Integrated Development (NEAID) and Childaid Network is ushering in a new ray of hope for some. It aims to maximise and facilitate potential change in schools of Northeast India, thereby ensuring joyful and quality learning, encouraging curiosity and innovation in children. AKIKARAN is an intervention towards systemic change that will, in the long run, generate think-tanks and a workforce that is not fed by the factory system of imparting education. The intervention is to create pragmatic ways of facilitating a school environment of active participation of children, optimizing learning by using the available resources, replicating best practices and meaningful community engagement



Currently, the project is in its pilot stage in two schools of Morigaon district – one school has a tea-tribe community and the other school has a community engaged in dairy farming, herdsman and daily wage earners. Children of these schools belong to a very poor economic background. Challenges are ample and the involvement of parents in their child education is marginally low, despite making repeated attempts to engage them.

What Is Unique About This Model Of Intervention?

Not many interventions focus on a holistic transformation that Akikaran is currently aiming at. Through means and ways that engage a community of multiple stakeholders, it hopes to create a sense of ownership and commitment in addressing concerns relating to whole school transformation. Akikaran, thus, is a project that is aiming at a productive, collaborative and context-specific transformation, given the plurality of the northeastern region. The idea here is to consider students as equal and important partners and encourage critical thinking, questioning and curiosity by introducing innovative pedagogical practices that complement and strengthen the teaching of existing syllabus of government schools.

Working on the school culture is essentially important as it can enhance reform or be a barrier to change. But this is an aspect that is intensive and depends on how thoroughly the cultural issues have been considered in reform and implementation processes keeping in view how closely the school and the local community culture interact. The culture must facilitate quality, emphasizing lasting change. As per Akikaran's baseline study, there has been a consistent pattern of drop in achievement in math and language

learning (22.35 percentage point drop in achievement in math and a 12.39 percentage point drop in achievement in English) across all the intervention schools from Grades III to IV.

Akikaran's action towards this has been to look at it vis-à-vis the course content and the teaching modules for these respective grades. Although the national and regional statistics show this is co-related to a huge drop-out rate across the country, this can further be contested and discussed in context to the current intervention schools and if there are any specific qualitative factors contributing to the same. It will be important to see to it that teachers are not there merely to implement plans but that the planning serves the teaching as well as learning.

The Principal of one of the schools opines that there has been a considerable change in school attendance, children's participation, teacher engagement etc. post the Akikaran intervention. Children are more enthusiastic to come to school every day now. Activities like the *Gyan Ladder* which is a simple snake and ladder game through which children are quizzed on the day's learnings, excite them and they are always up for such joyful ways of learning.

In order to ensure joyful and value-driven learning in the real sense, Akikaran is trying to capacitate schools in the northeast with a holistic transformation that makes them self-sustaining in all forms. Attempts are made at replicating best practices and model schools through an Akikaran model that can be a tool for schools here in the region. Other areas of intervention has also been in motivating students, teachers and parents to create an enabling environment for children to learn broader sets of skills and understanding beyond core academic classroom knowledge, aesthetic improvement of the classroom and school through wall art, facilitate and involve teachers to design lesson/activity plan and how to do the same in teacher training workshops, parents and School Management Committee (SMC) meeting, community engagement in setting up kitchen garden for the school etc.

Akikaran believes in a culture which enables value based learning with a spirit of service and high expectations. The freedom of the child is at the heart of this program's idea. The program's approach to pedagogy relies on the belief that each child is "intelligent" in a different way and builds on that knowledge to drive instruction which fosters learning in a holistic environment. Such an approach in pedagogy will prepare children to use their learning to serve the community at large. The aim thus is to create communities that takes a sense of ownership and actively takes interest in the child's growth and education in the truest sense.

The Akikaran team and all its well-wishers envision, *"a society wherein all children – even in the remotest of areas in North East India – have the right to quality education in a nurturing school environment that fosters equitable and life-long learning opportunities which will help them develop as responsible and ethical members of society."* In order to facilitate this vision, a significant transformation in the education scenario in Northeast India is required. Towards this direction, Akikaran has made a small but significant headway in its own possible unique way, but there is a lot that still remains to be done. This would only be possible if Akikaran continues to get the active support of all its stakeholders, including the government. For the transformation that Akikaran is attempting to enable, can only be achieved in a context of collaboration and sharing, and keeping the child, the teacher and the community at the centre of school transformation.