

FOCUS: **BOMBAY**

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A photograph of a smiling woman, likely a preschool teacher, sitting and interacting with a group of young children. She is wearing a teal and purple patterned top. The children are wearing pink school uniforms. The background is slightly blurred, showing a classroom setting with a window.

Preschool Teachers: a Benchmark for Communities



The Preschool Education project

Implementation of the Mumbai Smiles Preschool Education project commenced in 2008¹. Its objective was to respond to the lack of public and affordable childhood education alternatives for families with limited means who could not consider accessing private schools.

In 2009, India approved the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act. To implement

it, governments and municipal authorities all over the country took steps to ensure that all children from 6 to 14 years of age could have universal access to primary education. In the last decade, these efforts have made it possible for India to improve on the Millennium Development Goals on education by coming significantly close to a 100% of pupils of this age enrolled, although there are still areas for improvement, such as the high absenteeism and dropout rates, especially among girls.

¹ See *Focus: Bombay, Special Preschool Education*, November 2016, and *Focus: Bombay, Health in Preschool Centres*, June 2017.

Some of the photos used for this issue were taken before the pandemic.

However, this legal initiative did not take into account childhood education before the age of six. This is a very important time to lay solid foundations that will make it easier for children to optimise their learning process once they are in primary school.

The objective of the Mumbai Smiles Preschool Education project is for children from neighbourhoods with limited means to find a place where they can prepare themselves emotionally and educationally, with a view to accessing formal and compulsory education in the best circumstances. Furthermore, it seeks to offer safer spaces where they can also improve their health and nutrition.

Initially aimed more generically at vulnerable families and groups, our preschool centres have focused on two specific groups since 2018: on the one hand, the children of women who are victims of trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation; and, on the other hand, children from homeless families, who are also at a

very high risk of being drawn into trafficking networks. They all live in environments in which there are many threats, such as rejection and discrimination, and experience abuse, mistreatment, lack of care and protection, etc. Preschool schooling prevents child exploitation and makes it easier for minors to lead the kind of life appropriate to their age. At the same time, it provides them with the basic knowledge and care they need for a satisfactory integration into primary education. More recently, the involvement of preschools is part of our programme to combat trafficking, as we understand education as a tool that reinforces the prevention of this serious social problem.

Likewise, an improved pedagogical programme has been implemented in all preschools since 2018. This



programme had already been tried and tested beforehand in specific centres in previous years. It is focused on the student and is based on the premise that all children are capable of learning and have the potential to take control of their own learning process, from the individuality of each one, and a process that involves not just the school but also their families and communities.

In the proposed model, the student plays an active role as agent of their own learning process. The methodology uses the game as a tool, which is a vehicle for learning that facilitates creativity and innovation, and generates a context in which children can be more receptive to information. Likewise, the role of the educators

is redefined: they do not play the traditional role of the teacher who has the knowledge and shares it with their students; but that of the person who learns at the same time as the students. The educators are in a position to learn about their students: they learn with them and from them.

In 2020, the Indian government approved the National Education Policy, in which the preschool period (starting from the age of three years) was made mandatory, with a proposal that prioritises activity-based learning. For us to adapt to the new regulations approved in this law, we plan to implement various training programs for our teachers, which we will be doing in the coming financial years.





Teachers: support for their communities...

The Mumbai Smiles Preschool teachers come from the same communities where they work. They experience and share the same problems, needs and demands. And, for the same reason, they are perceived by the pupils' families as someone close and trustworthy. These relationships have become stronger over the years and have gradually extended beyond the families participating in the Preschool Education project to include members of the community in general.

This mutual understanding and trust has made it possible for the role of the teachers to go far beyond the purely educational one. For the people of the community, they are interlocutors through whom they can make requests and proposals to Mumbai Smiles. They are also an important support when it comes to conveying messages to the beneficiaries. In fact, this is what has happened in recent months, namely during the COVID-19 pandemic when they were the first to give real information about the virus and how to prevent its spread.

For all these reasons, we often say that they are our voice in the communities: authentic agents for change, active subjects whose influence is fundamental.





... and our eyes on the ground.

In addition to this, they also play an essential role in the success of our projects. At the same time, they are our eyes in the communities. Many of our actions provide a response to specific situations in which people may need help, which may include: violations of their rights, gender violence, health problems, etc. And it is the teachers, who are in this environment on a daily basis, who identify and communicate these

situations to us, making it possible for the relevant team to implement the necessary measures.

The role of preschool teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic²

At the end of March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic reached India with all its virulence, forcing the government to order a lockdown of the population and the closure of all economic activities deemed non-essential. This lockdown prevented the poorest people from continuing to go about their (usually informal) economic activities, which enabled them to get by. This prevented them from accessing food and basic products, condemning millions of families to a situation of great uncertainty.

Mumbai Smiles took action in response to these needs, relying, as always, on the support of the preschool teachers when it came to implementing them.

Given that the pandemic has entailed the closure of all educational centres in the country, including preschool centres, the challenge has been a very important one. Many families have a mobile

² See *Focus: Bombay. The response to the COVID-19 crisis*, July 2020.



phone and have been able to receive materials by messaging (such as WhatsApp) and through phone calls that the teachers have made to every student every two days. But in cases where the families do not have a mobile phone, our team has been locating them one by one so that they can get the materials to them in the manner indicated in each case. Likewise,

depending on how literate the parents of the students are, their involvement has been requested to supervise and support the work of their children, using the materials supplied by the team. Where this has not been possible, the teachers have provided their own students with instructions and have tried to keep track of their progress periodically.



Another way in which teachers have been playing an essential role since the pandemic started has been in the fight against rumours and misinformation. Many misconceptions persist even today about the virus, such as that it is spread only among members of certain social classes or among people of specific

origins or nationalities. Likewise, there were misconceptions about preventative practices, such as that drinking alcohol prevented infection. One year on from the start of the pandemic, misconceptions still exist among groups with less access to information. We are even coming across people who believe that the use of masks is due to pollution rather than a virus.

The teachers have played, and are playing, an essential role when it comes to conveying truthful information based on official



sources and information from health authorities, avoiding rumours and superstitions that may lead to bad practices. They have also given families specific information on how to prevent infection, and what medical resources are available if they need assistance.



The organisation's teachers have also played a fundamental role in monitoring the beneficiary families, keeping themselves updated on their situation and their needs especially. In this way, the organisation can respond to them and implement the actions that are necessary.



in their own words...

Each of the women who work as teachers in any of our preschools has a story worth listening to. We bring you three of them, which are true testimonials of their commitment and dedication to the children of their schools

and to all the people who live in their communities.

Many thanks to Akshata, Sabina and Sheela, and to all the Preschool Education project teachers, for your work, commitment and dedication!

in their own words...

Akshata Satywan Gawade,

25 years old, is a teacher in the Cheda Nagar preschool, where children who live with their families on the streets of this



neighbourhood are being provided with schooling. It is one of the poorest areas in Mumbai. She lives with her parents and her

brother in the Suryanagar area, in the Vikroli neighbourhood.

How did you find out about the Mumbai Smiles project?

Through Swapnali Bansode [a specialist who worked on the former MMitra project for the support of pregnant women], who was assisting pregnant women in the area. She asked me to join as an Arogy Sakhi [a health care worker], and that's how I found out about Mumbai Smiles.

This project ended in March 2018, but then I joined as a

teacher in the Chheda Nagar preschool, taking the afternoon shift.

How is your relationship with the whole community, families, etc.?

I have a good relationship with the people in the community. When I go to school, or return home, they often come up to me and share with me the things, good or bad, that are happening to them. They invite me to their birthday celebrations, etc. They make me feel as if I were part of their family!

How have you supported the community during the lockdown and the pandemic?

When Mumbai Smiles arranged for the distribution of basic materials, I went door to door to deliver first aid kits, masks, etc. I listened to them and advised them when they explained their problems and needs to me. I also supported them by distributing educational materials, such as notebooks

and pencils, and by sending them educational videos. For the families who do not have mobile phones in which to watch the videos, I explain the materials and tasks in person to the parents so that they can work on them with their children.

Do you think that the people in the community had all the information and support they needed during that period?

From the beginning we have been in constant contact with the community, giving them information about prevention, about tests, and about how they can register for vaccination. I think we're doing everything that can be of help to people during these difficult times.

Is there anything that they may have needed that we could not provide?

Yes, perhaps food kit support should be more frequent. The parents are unemployed due to the lockdown and do not have a source of income available. The children are the

ones who are affected the most by malnutrition, so we should distribute the food kits more frequently.

[Mumbai Smiles has been distributing food since the first pandemic lockdown. However, there are government programs that enable families with limited means to benefit from the delivery of food. In recent months, the organisation's efforts have been focused on helping them to complete the often complex administrative procedures for enrolment in such programs].

Anything else you would like to add?

I am very grateful that Mumbai Smiles gave me the opportunity to work as a teacher. I feel that I have the respect and support of the community and I also have the opportunity to deliver a community service. For all this, I am happy to work with Mumbai Smiles and to do my bit to achieve the goals of the organisation.

in their own words...

Sabina Mohd. Sharif Khan, 38 years old, lives in Govandi with

her husband, mother-in-law and two children. She currently works as a teacher in a preschool run by Mumbai Smiles near the Deonar



landfill (which is one of the largest ones in Asia) and next to which hundreds of families live in very difficult conditions.

How did you start working as a teacher for Mumbai Smiles?

Previously, I worked as a preschool teacher at a Pratham organisation project; but they had financing problems, there was no continuity for me, and I was left without any work. One of the social workers told me about the job opportunity at Mumbai Smiles, so I got in touch and took part in the selection process. Luckily, I was

able to join the project.

Bapu Bhadke (Preschool Education project specialist) explained to me how the project and the organisation worked. Then I was in charge of conducting a study of the area to register 40 children between the ages of two and six at the centre. Along with the assistant teacher, Jyoti Sonawane, we were able to complete the enrolment of those 40 students in a preschool. And that was three years ago!

What do you like the most about being a teacher?

I feel proud to work as a teacher at Mumbai Smiles. We have the respect of those responsible for the project and also of the people in the community and the family members.

The bond with the people in the community is very special: the parents listen to my recommendations and guidance and they also ask me for advice when a problem arises.

How have you supported the community during the lockdown?

Participating in the distribution of food packages to families in need and to people with limited means. There were very special moments; for example, we were able to lend a hand to a blind person who had just settled in the area with a small child. We gave them cereals, precooked food and money for medicines; but above all we tried to support her so that she did not feel alone.

Do you think that the people in the community had all the information and support they needed during that period?

Yes, I think we covered almost all of the area, raising awareness about: the virus, how to protect yourself from infection, the precautions you need to take, and all that. In addition to the material support.

Anything else you would like to add?

I think we could support mothers with courses and workshops on crafts, tailoring, etc. This would allow them to work and support their families and not depend so much on aid in critical situations.



in their own words...

Sheela Santosh Shinde is 38 years old and lives in the Marol area in Andheri East. She



is married and has two children. She is a teacher at the Saibangoda school in the Arey Colony area.

How did you start working with Mumbai Smiles?

I started working seven years ago as a preschool assistant in the Marol Pipeline preschool. A year later, I had the opportunity to work as a teacher.

Before that, I had worked as a teacher at the Pratham organisation. I also did odd jobs for Mumbai Smiles, making flowers and greeting cards.

What do you like the most about being a teacher?

What I like the most is spending time with young children and teaching them different things

every day. Furthermore, I have good relationships with the people in the community; families are very receptive to things that we explain to them and that we ask them to implement in their lives; they are always prepared to listen and accept these recommendations.

During the lockdown, how have you supported the community?

When the distribution of food packages was arranged, I participated in the deliveries. I also checked the quality of the material. Another thing I participated in was explaining hygiene habits to people, as well as the use of disinfectants and masks, and hand washing.

We have been giving advice and recommendations on nutrition and food constantly, so that everyone is healthy. We also recommended that if they need to go to a hospital, they always go to public ones because there they have the right to be treated free of charge, while in the private ones

they will always ask them for sums that are unaffordable for them.

And we have also tried to get the students to continue studying from home. To this end, we have been sending them educational videos every day.

Do you think that people had all the information and support they needed during that period?

We have found that there are many false ideas that are being spread through social media about vaccination and testing, so we are trying to clear up these errors by providing real information about prevention, testing, and vaccination.

Sometimes they do not readily accept testing or registration for vaccination, and it is often because of ignorance. Therefore, giving them information and clearly explaining what these processes involve is essential so that they understand and

accept them.

Another important issue is that there are no doctors available in the area; they have to travel 3 or 4 kilometres to receive treatment. So we provide them with some basic medicines through the health team after consulting with the Mumbai Smiles doctor [Doctor Naushin, project manager for "Health on Wheels"].

Anything further?

I am very grateful that Mumbai Smiles has given me the opportunity to work as a teacher. I am receiving the respect of the community and, above all, I am very happy to work with these children.





NAMASTE

HELLO!

HYALO

NAMASKARA

WE GO FURTHER TO STAY CLOSER.
DO YOU COME WITH US?



**MUMBAI
SMILES**

TRANSFORMING FUTURES