

REIMAGINE ● RETHINK ● REFORM



BRIDGING THE GAP

Reimagining school education in a post-covid scenario



Atmashakti
TRUST





"This pandemic-induced education divide and learning loss will have a cascading effect on an entire generation of students."

-Observer Research Foundation (ORF)

"Educational disruption of this extent has alarming effects on learning loss and school dropout. Beyond this, it poses threats to gender equality, including effects on health, wellbeing and protection that are gender-specific."

Stefania Giannini, UNESCO, Assistant Director-General for Education.

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MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRPERSON, OSCPCR

The COVID-19 has impacted the education of children heavily and it requires a collective action to bring back all children into the fore of education.

In this context, Atmashakti Trust and its allied organizations have supported over 1 lakh children in terms of providing them remedial class through 'Mo Chatashali' during the pandemic, especially in areas where children had less access to online education which was initiated by the Government of Odisha.

To recognize their commendable effort in the field of children's right to education, OSCPCR felicitated them during the 11th Foundation Day in 2021.

Simultaneously, they have come out with a report entitled "Bridging the Gap", where they have undertaken studies on the status of school infrastructure, parent's literacy level, challenges faced by SMCs and teachers which they have presented to OSCPCR for further action in this regard.

The Odisha State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (OSCPCR) is a statutory body set up on 1st November, 2010 by the Government of Odisha by virtue of power given to it under section 17 of the Commission of Protection of Child Rights Act (CPCR Act), 2005 (Amended in 2006).

Looking at the need of the issue, OSCPCR is conducting a consultation where these findings will be discussed and recommendations will be submitted before the state government and appropriate authorities for needful action at their end.

I look forward to a meaningful deliberation on the report and suggestions on recommendations.

Ms Sandhyabati Pradhan

Chairperson, Odisha State
Commission for Protection of Child
Rights, Government of Odisha



“Disruptions to education systems over the past year due to COVID-19 is irreversible and it has already driven substantial losses and inequalities in learning.”

FROM THE EXECUTIVE TRUSTEE'S DESK

**Everything else can wait,
but Education cannot!**

From Mid-March 2020, our children have experienced lots of encounters in terms of their education, health, and many other aspects. Due to the COVID-19 induced school closure, children have remained away from education, friends, and teachers. All the efforts to provide online education during the pandemic is applaudable, but children who lack any digital device or live in remote areas could not get access to it. Reports suggest that due to the prolonged school closure, many children, particularly girls, may not return to school even when schools reopen.

With this context, we have undertaken research studies on understanding mental wellbeing of children during the pandemic, school infrastructure in Odisha, Challenges faced by SMC members and Teachers and parent's literacy level and suggested policy recommendations for stakeholders to manage post-covid school education scenario in Odisha.

(Ruchi Kashyap)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report intends to appraise academicians, intellectuals, policymakers, and influencers whose actions and decisions impact the education of underprivileged children about the evolving needs of post-COVID lockdown classes. The report consolidates the set of recommendations based on the consultations held at various stages with multiple stakeholders.

Since 2018, Atmashakti Trust, Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha and Mahala Shreamajeebee Mancha Odisha have worked on a series of initiatives to improve the quality of education in rural Odisha. In 2021 through Mission Mo Chatashaali we could reach over one lakh children with remedial classes in COVID times. This made us understand the state of education better and we requested the renowned academicians, educationists, Social Workers, Professionals, Journalists, politicians, and influencers to form a recommendation committee to come up with a holistic solution for plugging all the gaps in education. Before coming up with solutions, we did an in depth analysis of the problem.

We conducted studies on villages of 84 blocks of 17 Districts of Odisha which have a high population of Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Other Backward classes. We conducted surveys on mental health and well being of children, challenges faced by teachers and School Management committee and an analysis of existing school infrastructure. Our team also researched the different approaches to plug the gap in learning of the rural tribal and underprivileged children. Bottlenecks, challenges and gaps in the existing system were identified.

91.09% of the 10258 children surveyed reported that they did not have access to a smartphone making their learning difficult and stressful. 76.7% of children said there was no connection with teachers during prolonged school closure, 45.5% of children said that they were engaged in household work to support their families. More importantly, 74.6% of children reported that they experienced mental and physical abuse during the pandemic. Of the 4357 parents interviewed around one third did not attend school and were not able to read and write. Thus it is apparent that many children did not get academic support from their parents during the lockdown. The Right to Education Act envisages the role of parents, guardians, teachers, and students under the School Management Committee. Our study with 1107 members found that 34.9% of the committee members were not aware that school development works fell under the SMC responsibility. Teachers also faced several problems in handling the new methods of teaching adopted during the lockdown. Out of 695 teachers surveyed, 42.7% did not get any training related to conducting online classes. 47% stated that they are looking for support from all stakeholders to run schools once it reopens.

The recommendations include various sections - Infrastructure, Stakeholders and hybrid strategies. There is a need to ensure a safe, healthy and hygienic environment for teaching and learning. So, the first recommendation is about building and repairing school infrastructure using convergence with Government schemes like MGNREGA. Our second recommendation is related to teacher's shortage. The third key component in the teaching learning process is the community. Our recommendation is to strengthen the School governance through an active School Management Committee and awareness amongst parents, teachers, and community members for engaging with the teaching learning process of children.

The other part of the recommendations includes after-school strategies required to bridge the learning gaps created due to lack of education during the school closure period. It summarizes the attempts made by Atmashakti Trust and its allies to ensure continued education for children during the prolonged lockdown of schools through its various education initiatives.

We intend to work in collaboration with the Government, Civil society and the School Management to plug all the gaps in the education of the rural underprivileged children.

OUR JOURNEY ON EDUCATION

01 People's Manifesto 2018

Ahead of the 2019 General Elections, rural Tribal and Dalit communities in Odisha demanded the inclusion of Education in the political manifesto. Many political parties agreed and included Education in their manifesto.

02 Disaster Relief & School Infrastructure (May 2019)

Relief & Rehabilitation Response to Cyclone Fani Situation analysis of health & school infrastructure. Repair of infrastructure in 7 schools in Behrampur GP, Krushnaprasad Block, Puri District

03 Education and Health Campaign (Oct 2019)

A statewide campaign - presented findings of school infrastructure of government-run schools and health infrastructure in government-run hospitals in Odisha. Government appointed 1038 Doctors and 1781 Teachers

04 Mission 3-5-8 (June-Aug 2020)

Assessment of 429 school-going children on their learning levels in English, Math & Odia. 652 remedial classes conducted, 4364 students reached, supported by 652 volunteers

05 Hamari Maang : Accha School, Sudharatmak Siksha (July 2020)

"A National Campaign on Education in Delhi NCR Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Bihar asking for quality education

06 Mo Chatashali - Mission 1 Lakh (Feb-July 2021)

Community-led initiative for student education during the pandemic. Supported by over 7000 volunteers. Outreach to over 100000 children

07 Mission Chatashali (Chalo Baat Karein) (July 2021)

As a follow up to Mission 1 Lakh, Mission Chatashali aims to reach out to 5 Lakh students and deliberation with all categories of stakeholders this is ongoing

08 Gunjara - Story on Wheels (Nov 15-Dec 10, 2021)

Understand the challenges faced by students, parents, teachers, and SMCs during school closure.

Advocate for - Improved Infrastructure, Supplementary Learning Support, Quality Education, Improved mechanism, training and counseling support to handle post-COVID classrooms, Volunteerism. Covered 25 districts, traveled over 4200 km, collected testimonies and stories from over 100000 stakeholders.

'MO CHATASHALI' INITIATIVE

After a few months of lockdown being imposed, India moved to online learning, where platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Television, Video demonstrations were used to continue children's schooling. The Government of Odisha also launched Shiksha Sampark Yojana but it reached out to a few. In Odisha, 10000 villages have no mobile/wireless network connectivity. The learning loss will continue, mental stress will remain in post-COVID times The parents either engaged the children in household chores or just let them play in the open. The children in remote rural areas had an added disadvantage of having parents with no or little literacy level and no guidance within family for education.

What is the problem?

Lockdown has put 321 million Indian children away from school, widened learning gaps. Especially in Odisha, out of 6 million school students in Odisha, 3.8 million students have no access to online education. By October 2021 schools have been shut for more than 80 Weeks.

What will happen if it is not addressed?

- Pre-existing learning deficit
- Digital divide
- Parents unprepared for distance and home schooling
- Gaps in childcare
- Rise in drop-out rates
- Increased exposure to violence and exploitation
- Social isolation and many more...

What were the Solutions offered?

- Government- digital learning program
- Private Sector- Schools/ tuition
- NGOs - learning centers
- Community - Mo Chatashali

What is Mo Chatashali?

Mo Chatashali is a community-led education initiative that provides students, remedial classes, to students by a trained-local volunteer in an environment that is conducive for children. It runs in 5167 villages of 764 Gram Panchayats in 84 Blocks of 17 Districts in Odisha. The initiative covered 100541 children with the help of 6251 volunteers.

How did it start?

- Villages allocated a dedicated place for running the Mo Chatashali centres with proper record keeping
- Standard operating procedures for COVID safety and Child protection were agreed upon and signed in a village resolution
- Educated youth were chosen as volunteers
- All the parents contribute in cash or in-kind to the volunteer who teaches children of class 1-5
- Chatashalee have Blackboard/roll up black board, chalk, stationery for children, colorful posters, Government's Ujjwala module for remedial learning and children's textbooks and notebooks/slates.
- All the books of records of attendance, contribution, resolutions, curricular material and assessments are kept in an organized manner.

Why Mo Chatashali?

- It keeps children connected to their education
- Addresses the learning gaps of children
- As it is a community-led initiative, it would foster ownership and collective responsibility among communities
- Mo Chatashali serves as a solution to the barrier of digital education
- In rural areas, government schools are the main place where children learn
- It promotes equitable educational outcomes by providing remedial education to children whose basic learning levels are low
- Bridge the demand-supply gap of education need of the children

Approach

- Network with local CSO Solidarity Support from the SHG, Youth Club, Yuvak Sangh
- Ujjwal modules to be followed for 1st 5th
- Joyful learning
- Community led teaching and monitoring
- Focused on Volunteering
- Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) to be followed



Stakeholder engagement

There is media coverage of good and model Mo Chatashali Centers. Government School buildings or community spaces are given by the community to run these centers. The Government school teachers also see the volunteers in a positive light. The engagement of parents in SMC and taking up the issue of education is gradually building up.

The collective is active in the places where Mo Chatashali is working well and vice versa. The reason for partial shutdown of most of the Mo Chatashalee centers was COVID pandemic wave and positive cases in the area. Along with parents, students and teachers, the other stakeholders include SMC and other committees, PRI members, Education rights activists, and others.

What are the Features of a Mo Chatashali?

Teaching-learning tools and Methods - Odisha Government's remedial learning module, Ujjwala was used as a reference teaching learning material. Children are taught in a play way method keeping safe distance from each other. Local resources and interactive tools were used by volunteers for creative ways of teaching and learning. Assessment of learning is done every 25 days.



Mo Chatashali Center- Community Space allotted by the village to be used as a learning center. The characteristics of the center is that it has enough space for social distance, a place to hang the blackboard and posters. Mo Chatashalee banner is a standard feature in all the centers so that the people recognize the center.

Volunteer - Two educated volunteers from the village were identified as teachers and were given training, the community decided to give some minimal contribution to the volunteer as a sign of gratitude. The volunteers were given basic training. The volunteer child ratio is 1:15.

Capacity building of volunteers - The collective's members support the volunteers when they visit the centre. They teach them games, introduction to play-way method of teaching and learning and also dos and don'ts of a volunteer.

The collective decided to further their career growth scope. Six areas of skill development have been identified by the Capacity Building team based on the interest of the volunteers. These are Defense services, Agriculture, Sports, Entrepreneurship, Government Jobs like teaching and other Skill development enrolments.

Based on their interest and aptitude the volunteers will be selected for these skill development programs to ensure their professional growth.

Parents' Engagement -All the parents are largely committed to send their children to Mo Chatashali center. Some of the parents also visit the center at the time of class to see the workings of the center.

When the second wave of the pandemic hit and villages also had cases of COVID positive patients then the parents had a meeting and resolved to not run the center for some time till the wave is high. This happened in 30% of the centers, in the other centers where the COVID cases were absent the Mo Chatashali centers operated as usual.

The parents have a sense of ownership about the safety and security of the children. Most of the parents are contributing regularly to the Mo Chatashali either in terms of rice or cash or any other contribution. Parents are sending the daughters to the Mo Chatashali Centers.

Standard Operating Procedures

- 15 students per center
- 2 Volunteer per center
- Social Distance
- Mask and Hand wash
- Toilet and Hygiene
- Play and learn method
- Discrimination free
- No Corporal Punishment
- Extra-curricular activities
- Follow Ujjwala Module
- Blackboard and Chalk
- First aid kit
- Mo chatashalee Banner
- Colorful walls
- Media coverage
- PRI and other stakeholders are engaged
- Parents active in decision making
- Village resolution of all decisions
- District level meeting
- Volunteer Profile
- Assessment
- Attendance
- Contribution from Children's parents
- Records
- Safe Drinking water

” I study in class 4. Every day I attend the Chatashali to learn and to play with my friends. I enjoy myself a lot during the time I am here.
Pabhasini Majhi (Student)



INVISIBLE NARRATIVES

GUNJARAN- STORY ON WHEELS

There are existing government plans to impart quality education for all, but its implementation is a challenge. The community needs to contribute to support the Government in their effort to improve the condition of the education of the children. Focusing on what can be done to address this challenge, people's collectives like the Odisha Shramajeebee Manch (OSM), Mahila Shramajeebee Mancha Odisha (MSMO), and its regional organizations from 17 districts took the initiative of 'Gunjaran', a campaign (commenced on 15th Nov to 10th Dec) to identify the underlying problems and stakeholders whose involvement is required come up with a sustainable system to bridge the learning gap of the children in post COVID times.

The initiative was joined by other People's collectives from states like Chhattisgarh, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. The purpose of Gunjaran was to hear the unheard voices collecting stories of children - their aspirations, concerns, and fears along its journey of more than 4200 km covering 25 districts of Odisha. The interactions also focused on the challenges of parents, teachers, and school management committees, whose active participation is required to support government initiative and bridge this gap.

These stories will be used for policy advocacy at the national and state level to ensure that actions are taken to ensure quality education on the ground. Through Gunjaran, communities want their voices to reach stakeholders to bring about the following changes:

1. Remedial classes alongside regular classes to bridge the learning loss caused by inaccessibility to online education and automatic promotion to senior class during the pandemic lockdown.
2. Counseling and additional support to children to cope up with mental pressure, anxiety, and uncertainty brought about by long school closure.
3. Convergence with different Government schemes for repair and construction of school infrastructure to make them safer and more functional.
4. Active, trained, and empowered SMC to improve the quality of education



Gunjaran campaign was planned in 4 phases. They are:

Phase I: Validating the Problem:

Key Learnings :

- Adverse effect of school closure on children
- Parents inability to provide support
- Teachers & SMC members challenges
- Absence of conducive learning environment due to lack of infrastructure

Phase II: Finding Solutions:

Interaction with government departments, MLAs, MPs and proposing solutions of convergence, stakeholder engagement volunteerism to bring quality education to rural Tribal and Dalit children

Phase III: Follow-up

Targeting External stakeholders to educate them about the importance of education so that they claim their rights

Phase IV: In its last week of the journey, Gunjaran presented the demand and policy recommendations to the Government to ensure quality education by collaborative action.

STUDY REPORT

RATIONALE, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Schools and their allied programmes play a vital role in the holistic development of a child. Besides textbook learning, schools are grounds where children develop social skills through interaction with others and develop interests for life by engaging in sports, arts, and cultural activities. Time spent in school helps in laying a strong foundation for the future development of a child. Hence, school life is a crucial part of growing up and it is important, especially for children from poor and marginalized communities who do not have many opportunities and are in most cases first generation learners in their own families.

COVID -19 and the subsequent school closure to control the pandemic created havoc in the field of education. There was a complete halt of physical classes, and the introduction of online classes has not only led to a digital divide but also widened the pre-existing learning gaps of the children. Besides the visible impact on learning, there have been numerous reports and studies in recent months on how the pandemic has affected the mental well-being of people, especially children leaving them more vulnerable as they transition to a post-Covid classroom. Along with children, teachers, parents, school committee members and the community have expressed their helplessness and inability to deal with online education and be a support system for their children during school closure.

Atmashakti Trust decided to conduct surveys on students' mental well-being, parents' literacy status, SMC status, and teacher's challenges during the pandemic with its allies Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha and Mahila Shramajeebee Mancha, Odisha. This way, we could collect evidence from the ground, harvest the data and share the findings with the Odisha government and other appropriate authorities.

Objectives and Methodology

Key Objectives of the study

- Understand the impact of COVID -19 and school closure on the mental well-being of children
- Understand the functional literacy of the Parents
- Understand the challenges faced by School Management Committees
- Understand the challenges faced by Teachers
- Use the survey findings and suggest recommendations that can be implemented by the Government in a post-Covid Classroom

Sample for the Study

The study was undertaken in 84 blocks of 17 rural districts of Odisha which are largely represented by Tribal, Dalits, and other marginalized communities. The highlights of the reports are: The main reasons are our familiarity with the area, availability of manpower and easy access to respondents.

Approximately 1254 team members which included Mo Chatashalee volunteers, Jan Sathis, Coordinator, Junior Coordinators, Team Leaders, and Gunjaran members supported respondents with the self-administered study form and subsequently harvested the data from the forms.

During the study, COVID Protocols were followed, and consent was taken from every individual.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Key Findings

Students Mental Well Being Survey Findings

Children, despite being less affected by the coronavirus itself, are bearing a disproportionate burden of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and it is not just affecting their physical health but also their mental wellbeing. The prolonged school closure and movement restriction caused fear, anxiety, stress, and social bearings among children, parents, teachers and other stakeholders. Therefore, as schools reopen, addressing the mental wellbeing of these children will play a crucial role in helping them to overcome psychological distress and adjust smoothly in a post-COVID classroom.

We started the survey with 10,258 school-going children of Class 1 to 8 from 84 blocks of 17 rural districts of Odisha. The report says “almost half of children (63.3 %) could not get required support from their family members to deal mainly with their emotional, social as well as learning support needs during the pandemic. Most importantly, out of 10,258 children, 94.6% were from government-run schools, 87.7% were from schools under School and Mass Education Dept. and 6.9% were from schools managed by ST & SC Development, Minorities & Backward Classes Welfare Department, and Government of Odisha.

Lack of access to online education also played a major role in children's elevated mental stress. 91.09% of the children interviewed for the study reported that they did not have access to a smartphone making their learning difficult and stressful. Online education was attended merely by 11.09% of children. But the grave concern is that online education was quite confusing for 87.7% of children. Even 17% of children, who attended online classes anyway, showed their discontent, saying that it was challenging for them on many fronts. While 12.8% of children have reported that they could not interact or ask questions with teachers for fear of being bullied by their teachers, 14.7% of them felt embarrassed to ask a question as the concept of online classes was something that none of them was prepared for.

Students' attitudes and cognitive abilities are influenced to a great extent by the support they obtain from teachers. But according to the study report, 76.7% of children said there was no connection between them and their teachers during the prolonged school closure period. Also, 61.5% of children reported that they were fearful about their learning loss when they heard about the school closure news.

Even though school closure was essential to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 among children, it affected the social behavior of children badly. Even more shockingly, 74.6% of children reported that they experienced mental and physical abuse during the pandemic. Also, 45.5% of children said that they were engaged in household work to support their families.

Parent's Literacy Survey Findings

Parents can provide unique encouragement for children in their recognition and valuing of children's early achievements in, for example, using books, reading, understanding various things, and writing. They deliberately teach their pre-school children some aspects of literacy. Parental supervision in a child's development phases forms a crucial part of the overall holistic development of the child.

Out of 561 million literates in the country, 145 million literates are educated only up to the 'Below Primary' level and another 147 million up to 'Primary' level.

91.09%

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76.7%

of children said there was no connection between them and their teachers during the prolonged school closure period.

74.6%

74.6% of children reported that they experienced mental and physical abuse during the pandemic.

45.5%

of children said that they were engaged in household work to support their families.

Parent's education promotes the use of positive parenting practices, such as using positive language, planned discipline, and family routines. It also encourages nurturing behavior and increases parents' knowledge of child development and communication styles. Looking at the situation of school closure due to the pandemic COVID-19 the organization has conducted an online survey to ascertain the learning level of the parents in rural pockets of the state and how the parents are tackling their children in their regular learning. In this context, the organization has conducted a sample survey among 4357 numbers of parents. The findings of the survey reveal the difficulties at the parent's level.

The outcome of the survey is not very promising as out of 4357 parents, 27% of the parents have not attended any school, 33% of parents aren't able to read Odia alphabets, 30.1% of parents aren't able to read Odia words & sentences and 42% parents aren't able to write Odia language even though Odia is the mother tongue. On the other hand, almost 35.4% of the parents aren't able to carry out small additions and subtractions. The study result shows that 36.1% are not even able to do any small additions, 8.9% of the parents can score 1, 7.5% of the parents can score 2, 13.8% of the parents can score 3, 13.1% of the parents can score 4 out of the total scores 5. Looking at the survey results one can understand the extent to which parents can provide basic education to their children during the school closure due to the pandemic.

Study on challenges faced by SMC members

The School Management Committee (SMC), constituted under the Right to Education Act 2009 plays an important role in ensuring accountability in India's education system, especially in Government schools. The Act envisions the SMC as a decentralized governance model which empowers them to keep track and monitor the functioning of the schools and oversee that the school grants are used effectively.

SMCs play a pivotal role in developing the tri-annual School Development Plans and annual work plans for the schools in every district and subsequently for every state of India. The RTE Act also highlights the critical role of parents as part of SMCs for developing a sense of ownership towards the good education of their child and for strengthening and improving the performance of schools in India. Overall, SMCs focus on the holistic development of the schools, which not only accounts to ensures good school infrastructure but also supervision/monitoring of finance, management, academic progress of children, with equal participation and say, bringing transparency in the education system.

The organization conducted a sample study of 1000 SMC members to know the occurrences of the members during the COVID-19 school closure. The following are a few key findings to bring to the notice of the policymakers and other stakeholders.

The survey report discloses that out of 1107 interviewed SMC members are mostly from the farmers and daily wage laborers segments. 9.7% of the members did not attend a single meeting, 15.7% of the members said that they didn't have any information about the meeting, 34.9% of the members were not even aware that monitoring of school development works came under their purview or not, 43.3% SMC members said that they never have checked the student's attendance, 65.5% of them said that if they will get a remuneration of Rs.210 or @one day wage of MGNREGA (whichever is the highest) for each meeting, it would make them more accountable to participate in every meeting of SMC without fail.

42%

of parents aren't able to write Odia language even though Odia is the mother tongue.

27%

of the parents have not attended any school..

33%

of parents aren't able to read Odia alphabets,

30.1%

of parents aren't able to read Odia words & sentences

9.7%

of the SMC members did not attend a single meeting

84%

of teachers faced challenges in delivering education digitally.

50%

of teachers face challenges related to tele-network and data expenses.

20%

of teachers received orientation on delivering online classes.

Study on challenges faced by teachers

A primary school teacher develops schemes of work and lesson plans in line with curriculum objectives. S/he has to facilitate learning by establishing a relationship with pupils, keeping the learning resources organized, and creating a positive learning environment in the classroom. The key role is to develop and foster the appropriate skills and social abilities to enable the optimum development of children, according to age, ability, and aptitude. S/he has to assess and record progress and prepare pupils for tests. S/he is to link pupils' knowledge to earlier learning and develop ways to encourage it further, challenging and inspiring pupils to help them deepen their knowledge and understanding. The sudden closing of schools led to new teaching methods - with online teaching methodology as the only option to be opted for by both the children and teachers. In India, online teaching is not very popular. Most of the teachers were not well trained to teach and conduct assessments online. Because of lockdown, with no choice, teachers started to teach and conduct assessments from their homes.

Conversely, the teachers suffered a lot due to the huge gap in direct learning. According to a survey by Learning Spiral, 84% of teachers faced challenges in delivering education digitally. Nearly 50% of teachers face challenges related to signal and data expenses. The teachers had no prior experience teaching online and the survey says less than 20% of teachers received orientation on delivering online classes. In an article published in Interactive Technology and Smart Education Journal (Vol 18), the findings revealed four categories of barriers faced by teachers during online teaching and assessments. Under home environment settings, a lack of basic facilities, external distraction and family interruption during teaching and conducting assessments were major issues reported. Institutional support barriers such as the budget for purchasing advanced technologies, a lack of training, a lack of technical support and a lack of clarity and direction were also reported. Teachers also reported limited awareness of online teaching platforms and security concerns. Teachers' personal problems including a lack of technical knowledge, negative attitude, course integration with technology and a lack of motivation are identified as the fourth category to hamper their engagement in online teaching and assessments.

In this context, the organization conducted a sample study of 695 teachers to know the state of mind on how they dealt with the different modes of teaching during the decisive time. It is found that 75.01% of teachers are engaged with multifarious assignments pre and during COVID-19 such as 56% are engaged in Census Survey works, 39.6% are engaged in Covid response work & 34.7% have engaged in other works apart from their scheduled job responsibilities. 31.2% of the teachers are not able to access the internet connectivity and even 5.4% don't have smartphones with them and most notably 26.4% of teachers are not even comfortable to operate smartphones. 42.7% of them have shared that they did not get any training related to conducting online classes for the students. On the other hand, they have lots of apprehensions about the mental health of students after the school reopens. 32.5% are saying that they have faced mental health issues, 47% of the teachers stated that they seek support from the parents, SMC's and volunteers to run the school smoothly once it is reopened.

Study on the State of infrastructure in Government-run schools in Odisha

55.1% of schools from the surveyed schools did not have a boundary wall. Whereas the Nuapada district has stood well with 83% of its schools having a

boundary wall, not a single school from Gajapati district has a boundary wall. The study reveals that 87.9% of government schools in the state did not have a playground. While Nayagarh district has the highest percentage of its schools with a playground (25%), which is also abysmally low, shockingly not a single school in Boudh and Gajapati districts did have a playground by the end of August 2021.

34.2% of schools in the surveyed districts did not have drinking water facilities and children have to go outside the school premises to drink water. Whereas Nabarangpur district has the highest percentage (93%) of schools with the facilities of drinking water, Boudh performs the lowest as only 22% of schools in the district has those facilities. However, according to the data of the state government, 34,394 (more than 50%) government-run schools have no drinking water facilities.

The absence of a functional toilet for such a long period is a key deterrent in Odisha schools. Building toilets in rural schools alone is not enough, they have to be usable too. The study report informed that 30.9% of schools in surveyed districts in the state lack a functional toilet facility. While it is a respite for children as 95% of schools in Jharsuguda district has that facility, but the situation is concerning as 53% of schools in Gajapati do not have a functional toilet facility. Schools, which are supposed to bridge the gap between health and hygiene, proper sanitation over there should be of utmost priority, the study report reveals.

A mid-day meal program in schools was launched to promote school participation and to eliminate classroom hunger across the country where the Odisha government claims that as many as 46 lakh children from class I to VIII in 53,000 government schools are served with a mid-day meal every day. However, many of the schools lack a functional kitchen safe which is vital for storing, cooking and serving of cooked food to happen in a safe, secure and hygienic environment. The study report found that 19.2% of schools still do not have a functional kitchen space.

Over the years, many government schools buildings need repair. And, as the Cyclone Fani inflicted severe damage of schools buildings across 14 districts in the state, they need immediate repair. The study report reveals that 78.9% of government school buildings need either minor or major repair.

16368

schools in Odisha needs a boundary wall according to the Odisha Government Data-2020

34.2%

of schools in the surveyed districts did not have drinking water facilities

30.9%

of schools in surveyed districts in the state lack a functional toilet facility

Government initiatives during the pandemic

- To ensure education during COVID 19, the Odisha government launched Siksha Sampark Karyakram through various online mediums using WhatsApp, YouTube, Television etc.
- In the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak, the ST & SC Development Department initiated an 'Alternate Learning and Mentorship Programme' to cater to the educational needs of ST/SC students from Class 2 – Class 10. The strategy primarily catered to two different target groups. For students who have access to the internet, whatsapp groups were formed through which e-content that maps the curriculum of Class 2-10 students were collated and created as per the schedule/timetable developed centrally. The Mentor Teacher Programme was devised for students without access to the internet.
- A teaching programme for village children was initiated by the Government with participants who were already enrolled in the teacher's training programme. As part of their field exposure, the teachers undergoing training were required to go back to their respective villages for a specific period of time and teach the children during the period of school closure.
- For school re-opening the Panchayat Department issued guidelines to the Panchayat to repair existing schools and build adequate infrastructure to make schools more usable and attractive through convergence with existing government schemes like MGNREGA and budgets allocated from 5th State Finance Commission and 15th Central Finance Commission.
- The Odisha Government has undertaken an initiative to transform 1025 educational institutions into Smart Schools under its 5T High School Transformation Scheme. The initiative reaffirms the commitment of the Odisha Government to providing quality education. The government should start a similar initiative with government primary schools in remote villages that are falling apart. A good foundation is essential for young children which will enable them to access the Smart Schools in the coming years.

WAY FORWARD AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Infrastructure and resources

Why infrastructure?

The RTE mandates at least one classroom for every teacher and an office cum-store-cum-head teacher's room, a safe and adequate drinking water facility for all children, separate toilets for boys and girls, and arrangements for securing the school building by boundary wall or fencing. There is strong evidence that high-quality infrastructure better supports instructions and improves learners' academic performance and reduces dropout rates. This also motivates children to attend school regularly.

Broad recommendation:

- Repair/upgrade of existing facilities and build new facilities where it is non-existent to ensure a safe, healthy, and hygienic environment for teaching and learning.
- Bring appropriate changes and repairs in the school building, classrooms, playground, boundary walls, toilets, and kitchen. All work is to be done in convergence with existing Government schemes like MGNREGA.

Specific recommendations:

As stipulated in the RTE Act, schools must have basic infrastructure facilities. This is also required to ensure the safety, security of children and create a child-friendly environment. Odisha has shown improvement in some major infrastructure facilities like around 94% of schools have libraries while 84% of schools are getting free textbooks as per the UNESCO's State of the Education report 2021. However, school infrastructure needs a major overhaul in the state to comply with the RTE norms for school infrastructure. Our study (State of School Infrastructure in Odisha) with 10,043 schools/villages under 82 blocks in 17 districts of Odisha reveals that 30.77% of schools do not have a functional toilet, 34.34% of schools do not have the facilities of safe drinking water, 57.31% of schools lack a boundary wall, 86.61% of schools do not have a playground and most importantly 76.02% of existing school infrastructure needs repairing and maintenance.

How it can be addressed:

- The MGNREGA Act permits rural sanitation-related works such as school toilet work and boundary walls. The government can have a further need assessment followed by inter-departmental coordination to utilize MGNREGA in improving school infrastructure. And this should be done in the first phase as part of a school readiness programme in line with the RTE norms.
- The Odisha government has already announced that playgrounds will be developed in 1,000 schools this year under the State government 5T initiative, and the rest would come up in a phased manner within three years. This must be expedited urgently to cover all schools.
- Apart from that, the government can pass an order to use a specified amount of MLA- LAD funds for the improvement of school infrastructure. In addition to that, the government should allocate/use the 15th finance commission for infrastructure development.

Resources

Teachers play a bridging role between parents and children, and they are central in improving the children's learning levels. The National Education Policy 2020 also recognizes and identifies teachers as the heart of the learning process. The RTE Act mandates that the Pupil: Teacher's ratio should be 30:1 in the primary level and 35:1 in the secondary level. However, the lack of available teachers has worsened the situation. The state has a total of 3,40,477 teachers in 68,717 schools of which 91% schools are in rural areas. About 11% of schools have vacancies and there is a requirement of around 28,816 teachers. Of the total positions, 67% are vacant in rural schools, according to the UNESCO report. There are also 3197 single teachers' schools (5%) in the state.

Recommendation

- To tackle the shortage of teachers in schools, the state government should fill up the vacancy immediately. Subsequently, the government should induce a proper rationalization policy for teacher recruitment so that more teachers can be placed in rural areas since rural schools account for 67% of teacher vacancies.

Other recommendations for consideration

- Like the infrastructure, accessibility also plays a major role and distance is vital to ensure children's access to school. School closure-merger has pushed many children out of school because the distance is too far. In the school closure-merger policy, it is clearly stated that schools will not be closed due to low enrolment of students if children must cross a railway track to attend schools, must cross a river/canal or forested place. (This provisioning can be placed taking from the school closure policy).
- Also, students have been entitled to receive an escort allowance to commute to the merged schools. The state government must provide that to all eligible students.
- The school closure-merger should be a decentralized decision and should be implemented after consulting with the community members, SMCs, children while keeping the best interest of children at the centre. In that case, the Education Standing Committee at GP level must be reactivated and empowered to look after the development activities in the areas of school education.
- Secondly, the state government must involve SMCs and Palli Sabha/Gram Sabha platforms while taking decisions on school closure/merger.
- School management committee and panchayat raj committee on education at GP level need to collaborate for infrastructure development of the schools.

Awareness

Why the need for awareness?

It's been 10 years since RTE Act was enacted and Odisha is the second state in the country to make draft rules on RTE and has complied with other provisioning aspects such as the formation of OSCPCR, State advisory committee, etc. However, no great impact can be seen on parents and children as they are not fully aware of the act and the provisions it offers to the beneficiaries. Community participation/ ownership in making the education system work seamlessly is posing challenges as SMCs and PTAs are not taken as contributors to this development. They are hardly aware of their roles and functions which results in poor planning for school development. A study entitled "FUNCTIONING OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE AT ELEMENTARY LEVEL" by Venkateswar Meher and Eeswar Patel reveals that 100% of SMC members (15 samples in rural Odisha) lack of awareness among community members and lack of active involvement of parent members.

Similarly, parents' and guardians' lack of knowledge about the RTE ACT hinders the implementation of the act to ensure every child gets access to elementary education. Moreover, the magnitude and depth of the impact of the lockdown on children's educational and psychosocial growth are not fully understood by parents, guardians, and the public. Children will struggle to cope up in a school environment once schools reopen but parents and guardians are clueless about how to deal with the children's mental health in such a situation.

Broad Recommendation:

Strengthening school governance by ensuring active involvement of the School Management Committee in the day-to-day management of schools, ensuring transparency related to budget allocation and fund utilization, and building a community of involved stakeholders which includes teachers, parents, local self-governance bodies, and students. Ensuring wide publicity of the act among the parents, guardians, and common people is vital to effective implementation. The post lockdown impact on children's learning abilities, methods to bridge the gap must be highlighted among the parents, guardians, and community members, else it will lead to a snowball effect, impact the future lives of the children.

Specific recommendation:

- The SMCs are key to the effective implementation of the act, they need to be reoriented, trained and thoroughly involved in the school management. The PRI members are another key stakeholder in the process of providing free schooling to children in the county.

They play the role of guardian and monitor the schools in the decentralized Governance. They need to be sensitized regarding their roles and responsibilities.

- Awareness around the causes and effects of lockdown, impact of school closure on children among parents and guardians.
- Training and orientation to parents on ways to deal with children's psychological issues that developed because of the lockdown.
- Awareness to parents and communities on how to motivate children to attend school and retain them over a sustained period.

How it can be addressed:

- One day for SMCs-Every month, there should be a meeting with SMC members in school where discussion on roles and function of SMCs must be discussed comprehensively following the government's training module Sahayoga-II.
- SMC members must be incentivized (remuneration per seating) for attending/participating in the discussions/training. This will encourage more participation as most of them are daily wage workers/laborers and they will lose a day's wage if they participate in the meeting.
- Government should also consider collaborating with NGOs/CBOs to facilitate this training. First, they can conduct Training of Trainers (including local youths, certified teachers who have completed their studies and NGOs representatives who can facilitate training in schools every month.
- Main features of RTE Act, what are children's rights, roles of SMCs should be wall-painted in school premises as well as in public places in Odia as well as in local dialects.
- Training and meetings for the standing committee on education at the GP level must be done every month.
- Training and orientation to parents on ways to deal with child psychological issues created due to lockdown. This counseling/training session must be included in the PTA meeting every month
- SMC needs to be made aware of their roles and responsibilities in managing the school, planning for grant utilization, and in preparing the development plan of the school. The CSO working in the field can be roped for providing detailed on-field & off-field training to the SMC members.
- Learnings from the disaster by SMC needs to be incorporated as a training module with the help of experts and the same to be taught and oriented to the SMC members for future preparedness.
- RTE comprehensive awareness to the community through the involvement of CSOs, Community organizations, People's organizations, parents, and guardians.
- Parents and guardians should be aware of post-disaster gaps created in class-appropriate learning outcomes and the cumulative learning losses preceding the previous quality education.

Awareness of the importance of the long-term impact of learning losses to the parents and guardians needs to be done immediately after school reopening. It can be done at regular parent-teacher meetings. During that time, the importance of bridging the gap between school and home learning to cope up with losses and the role of parents as peers to the children should be highlighted.

Bridging the learning gaps through after school teaching initiative

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the use of technology in education became important but as was evident, online education access was limited because of multiple reasons – lack of devices, internet connectivity, lack of preparedness of teachers in the use of technology and lack of resources in regional languages. A recent report by Prameya, the Oriya Daily has revealed that more than 6.3 million out of 6.6 million school children in Odisha have not accessed digital learning in the year 2020 which takes government data into account in its report. Subsequently, the media report of The Sambad says that 97 thousand students have already dropped out from the government school during the year 2020 where 60% of them are from the tribal and other remote areas in Odisha.

From the study conducted by Azim Premji Foundation it is found that "on average, 92% of children

have lost at least one specific language ability from the previous year across all classes. These abilities include describing a picture or their experiences orally, reading familiar words, reading with comprehension, and writing simple sentences based on a picture". Another key finding of the study is "on average, 82% of children on an average have lost at least one specific mathematical ability from the previous year across all classes. These specific abilities include identifying single and two-digit numbers, performing arithmetic operations, using basic arithmetic operations for solving problems and describing 2D/3D shapes as well as reading and drawing inferences from data. The serious loss of learning calls for immediate action from policymakers of the nation.

Broad recommendation: To bridge the cumulative learning losses, it is essential to look at supplementary learning programs. These can be in the form of bridge courses with extended hours, community facilitated volunteer-led after-school remedial learning programmes, other community-based engagements, appropriate curriculum, and proper capacity building of teachers. Initiatives need to be taken to bridge the learning gaps created between urban and rural children due to unequal access to the internet during the lockdown period.

Specific recommendations:

- Rural children need after-school support to cater to the gap created by school closure. Govt must take initiative to involve the community, youth, educated persons to teach rural children after school.
- The unemployed certified teachers, bachelors of education, the undergoing trainees of CT and B.Ed colleges should be utilized for teaching the underprivileged children.
- States should redesign the syllabus to deal with learning gaps created due to unequal access to online education during the lockdown.

How it can be addressed

- It can be done by involving the local educated volunteers. Volunteers can be selected with the help of NSS, NYK volunteers, SHG federations, recognized youth clubs, and civil society organizations. Training and motivating the volunteers through recognition and rewards.
- By forming village education committees including the members of the school management committee to select the venue, arrange logistics and monitor the process of remedial learning.
- Local teachers of primary schools, private schools, retired teachers and educated seniors can play the role of mentors to the centers.
- Digital apps can be developed to guide the volunteers in teaching and monitoring the progress.
- Building the capacity of teachers, school administrators through continuous demonstration and dialogue to address the need for school education in a post-pandemic scenario.

Some other important recommendations:

- Schools have reopened for higher classes but there is still no sign of primary schools reopening. Primary students who suffered more due to a lack of online education are still locked out. Schools should be reopened soon with proper guidelines and all covid appropriate behavior to be maintained.
- Decentralization of decision-making is critical in this time. Therefore, the government should involve the SMCs and Gram Sabha in decision-making for the reopening of schools.
- Government should take the responsibility for all the losses and gaps in school education during the pandemic time and must set strategies to overcome such a situation in the future. Disaster preparedness plans for the education department shall be designed to avoid prolonged school closure in the future.
- Specific guidelines to address the gap in childcare, social bearings, child trafficking, abuses post-school reopening at schools.
- The summative assessment of children in all subjects of the previous classes may be conducted, the same may be shared with parents and the children's action plan be designed to fulfill the losses.

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List of Abbreviations

- SHGs: Self-Help Groups
- SMCs: School Management Committees
- NYK-Nehru Yuva Kendra
- RTE: Right to Education
- CSO: Civil Society Organization
- PTA: Parent-teacher Association
- NGO: Non-Governmental Organizations
- CBOs: Community Based Organization
- MGNREGA: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
- OSCPCR: Odisha State Commission for Protection of Child Rights
- SOPs: Standard Operating Procedures

PROFILES OF RECOMMENDATION COMMITTEE

Recommendation committee a group of expert advisory panel members convened by Atmashakti Trust for the purpose of reviewing and making technical recommendations on education.



Panchanan Kanungo

He is an eminent economist, author and former Finance Minister of Odisha. He has made exemplary contributions in the field of literature, social and economic movements and built up his leadership career starting from his youth. He was the former president of Utkal University Student Union and was the founder member of National Student Union of India (NSUI).

Ruchi Kashyap

She has an exhilarating career of 23 years in the development sector has been at the helm of Atmashakti Trust since 2008. She is the Executive Trustee and functional head of the organization.

Her domain of expertise is social impact strategy, design thinking, building people's collective, fundraising to name a few. She is also associated with University of Pennsylvania as a teaching fellow for the social impact strategy course. She is currently pursuing a policy development course from Harvard University.



Manoj Kumar Samantaray

He has 14 years of experience in the development sector as a researcher and M&E expert. He has worked with IPE Global, XIMB, CORD India & other leading organizations in the country.

He works in the capacity of State Manager at Atmashakti Trust and leads Research and M&E portfolio.

Dr Pravas Mishra

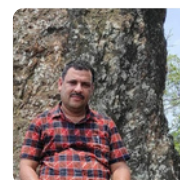
He is a development practitioner and passionate researcher with a demonstrated history of working in non-profit organizations.

He has expertise in public finance analysis, social development research, programme development and evaluation of the policies. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) in Economics from Utkal University. He currently leads Public Finance Policy Portfolio at Oxfam India.



Ghasiram Panda

He is the National Manager of Ending Child Marriage Programme of Action Aid India. He works with grassroots NGO's and has experiences on issues of child marriage and trafficking education. He is an advisor on RTE to OSCPCR and an consultant of Odisha State Disability Commission. Apart from this, he is also a Columnist, TV anchor and Debater.

**Prof. Bijay Bohidar**

He has a teaching experience of over four decades and is currently teaching political science as a visiting faculty in Ravenshaw University, Cuttack since 2012. He has special interest in the domain of political economy for marginalized section of society and social groups. He is involved in the development of bilingual political science.

Pradipta Nayak

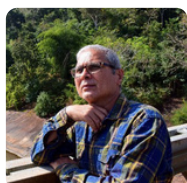
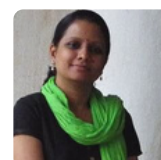
He is an activist lawyer fighting for human rights cases for the deprived communities in Odisha. Currently, he is the President of State Parents Association Odisha & also a columnist.

**Anil Pradhan**

He has been working in the areas of Child Rights especially on Right to Education over 2 decades, where his main focus is on ensuring effective implementation of RTE Act and advocating policy changes in the field of education. He is the secretary of Odisha based non-profit Sikshasandhan and is currently the State Convener RTE Forum, Odisha.

Sudatta Khuntia

She has almost 15 years of experience in the education sector and is the National Lead of Education Synergy Group at Action-Aid Association. She has expertise in policy research, analysis and advocacy on education focus.

**Priya Ranjan Sahu**

He has over 25 years of experience and is active in sharing, writing stories and journals related to Indian Politics, Development, Migration and Water crisis.

He is a regular contributor to Scroll, Down to Earth, Earth Journalism Network, The Wire and other international and national media outlets. With his vast experience, he writes stories relating to politics, development, migration, water issues and child rights

Rakhi Ghosh

She is an independent development journalist with nearly 20 years of experience. She focuses on education, health, migration, and climate change from a rights and gender perspective. Rakhi contributes regularly to The Wire, Grassroots, Village Square, Down to Earth, People's Archive of Rural India (PARI), The Pioneer, and The Political Business Daily.

She has received The Statesman Rural Reporting Award, PII-ICRC award, and fellowships from National Foundation of India (NFI), GOI-UNDP, Global Alliance against Trafficking of Women, and Reach Lilly MDR TB media.

**Sandeep Kumar Pattnaik**

He has vast experience as a trainer with many organizations such as NCAS & CPPA. Sandeep is an expert on Policy Research, Analysis and has a diverse experience of working with grass root organizations. He is expert trainer on PESA, FRA, Land Issues, Peoples' Advocacy and Policy Analysis.

CH Santakar Chelapila

He is a journalist and a child rights activist is working on issues related to children. He is currently working with a platform 'Voice for children' and working on issues of school children and its related programme. He also writes articles for English Newspapers.



ABOUT US

Atmashakti is a right-based catalyst organization which coalesces Tribal and Dalit people for their socio-economic and political empowerment. Over a period of more than a decade with consistent focus on collectivizing the community, Atmashakti has facilitated the process of formation of more than 23 collectives in 17 districts and 84 blocks of Odisha. Atmashakti has a mission to reach out to eight million underprivileged families in Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and other poor states within India.

Atmashakti incubates people's collectives and handholds them till they are mature. The trust acts as a mentor and facilitator for local people's collectives and their state-level federations Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha (OSM) and Mahila Shramajeevi Mancha Odisha (MSMO). Atmashakti does not take up community issues directly, rather it empowers the people's collectives to take up issues of the community and achieve impact. The changes which are brought about in the community through the actions of the collectives are long-term, slow, and steady which are gradually empowering the people. The work is done on the demand side by mobilizing people's collective and on the supply side by influencing policy and implementation of acts and schemes.

The foundation of Atmashakti rests on two principles of community mobilization. The first principle is to ensure local leadership which is achieved through the Activist Intervention Strategy, where a local activist, Jansathi, is identified and trained to highlight the issues of the community. The second principle is Carpet Coverage, where all the community members of the areas of operation are mobilized to collectivize i.e. if a block is selected by a collective then all the Gram Panchayats and their villages and hamlets in that block will have members in the collective.

Our Approach

Atmashakti believes that scale has the potential for amplifying the voice of the people and makes democracy more functional. Atmashakti envisions an empowered community of Tribal and Dalits who come out of the cycle of poverty, inequality, injustice, and patriarchy and enjoy the right to life with dignity. Atmashakti follows the rights-based approach because it gives agency to the people and also develops their understanding of their rights and entitlements. This approach strengthens democracy in essence. It also makes the government accountable when people demand their rights and calls for a response from the government.

About the work

In 2009 Atmashakti started its work in Odisha through four people's collectives which needed mentoring. Atmashakti incorporates learning from civil society action and evolves its strategy with time. A core strategy is finding current issues which impact the communities and mobilizing the communities for the same.

At the time of initiation of the People's collective, MGNREGA was used as the entry point. By virtue of it being an act, it was universal and gave monetary gains in a short duration which made people believe in the benefits of collectivizing. MGNREGA also led to local area resource development and systematic development of village infrastructure. People through their collectives started acting on local issues, big and small. These issues were based on two parameters, relevance to the local community and relevance to the present context. After MGNREGA, food security with a focus on the Public Distribution System was taken up as a campaign. At the time of the State level election, a Mass Manifesto campaign was started. Other campaigns and issues include FRA, water and sanitation, agriculture, gender-based violence, block sustainable units, the health of women and adolescent girls & health kits formation in villages. Post Cyclone Fani in 2019, the trust did some relief, rehabilitation, and preparedness work in Puri and in slum areas in Bhubaneswar.

For the past 12 years and more, we have worked extensively through people's collectives in Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh on six thematic areas - livelihood, food and nutrition security, forest rights, water and sanitation, education, and health with a focus on effective implementation of social security schemes.



Subarnapur, Odisha: Children welcoming Gunjara Yatra



Koraput, Odisha: Children attending remedial classes at Mo Chatashali centre







Kandhamal, Odisha: Children having a fun time at Mo Chatashali centre



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