

They reinvented themselves during the pandemic

Here is how the staff of two education-based non-profits did justice to the roles they had been pitchforked into

PRINCE FREDERICK

Service is hardwired into their system. Social sector organisations cannot stand idly on the sidelines and watch people suffer on account of the pandemic.

It was a call and an opportunity to be of help to the most helpless. The catch-22 situation: the pandemic had made it extremely difficult for these SSOs to continue with their regular services. In some cases, they would be strapped for resources to undertake humanitarian work. In some cases, they were strapped for skills. Sometimes, both.

Here are instances of how the staff in two SSOs made personal sacrifices, upskilled and reskilled themselves quickly to overcome these challenges and help the pandemic-hit.

AidIndia is primarily an education NGO that conducts after-school tuition in villages across Tamil Nadu and a few villages in Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh.

With around 500 part-time teachers and around 100 full-time coordinators, the NGO reaches out to 1,000 villages.

During the pandemic, they reached out to a whopping 2,000 villages, not with tuition classes, but provision kits and medicines.

“Our usual focus is on 1,000 villages – in 500 villages, we run our regular tuition programme. In another 500, we do periodic programmes, the most prominent one being the Walk And Talk English Programme. However, when our teachers and coordinators started handling pandemic relief work, there was more ground to be covered – at every turn. We would first start the work in our villages, and



An Asha for Education teacher with students; an Aid India team engaged in Corona awareness work.

when we would get wind of the challenges faced in neighbouring villages, we simply would not have the heart to not extend the relief work to those villages,” explains Balaji Sampath, founder of AidIndia.

It was hard on the teachers and coordinators on many levels.

“The coordinators had to take a small pay cut. Their travel allowances had to be stopped. The compensation for the part-time teachers being measly, they were spared the cut. However, their work had increased manifold, and had become uncomfortably unfamiliar. From working in one village through the week, taking



tuitions for three hours every day, they would now be heading out to a different village every day, covering five to six villages. In many cases,

a family member of the coordinators and teachers would have lost their job, and the pressure on them to put the food on the table

would be greater.”

Balaji discloses how some of the coordinators and teachers waded into hostile terrain, even having to foot-

slog alone aptitude.

“In the second wave, we ran as many as 15 Covid-care centres, linking with hospitals. The coordinators and teachers would be an important link, ascertaining who would have to be shifted to a Covid care centre. There was a clear need for upskilling – we hired a few nurses to help them impart the knowledge and provide guidance to the AidIndia team in their new work. Besides, the support of an online doctors’ collective also helped.”

Going the extra mile

Asha for Education seeks to fill gaps in the government education system by sending teachers to government schools.

The non-profit manages this work with 85 Asha teachers spread across seven districts, and 95 non-teaching staff to coordinate the operations.

“We had to freeze their salary increases and also reduce their salary a little bit. In many of the cases, the teacher’s spouse had lost their job. A lot of informal jobs went away – especially during the main lockdown, April to June of 2020; and again, during May-June of 2021. So, these teachers had become the sole earning member of their family. That the salary we gave them did not grow and was in fact a bit reduced, did not help matters,” discloses Rajaraman Krishnan, coordinator for the Chennai chapter of Asha for Education.

The most significant aspect of the story is that despite the personal challenges, these teachers accommodated the cause and the children on the terraces of their own homes, running mini-schools for these students to

make up for the lack of regular education on account of the pandemic.

Essentially, when someone signs up to work full-time for a voluntary organisation and is taking a salary, they understand that the element of volunteering cannot be separated from their work.

The pay packet would be lighter than the one for a comparable position in the corporate sector. However, when the chips are down, it is easy to lose sight of this fact. The Asha teachers did not.

“Many of the Asha teachers possess the spirit of volunteering and have often – especially during the pandemic – gone above and beyond what is expected of them.

In terms of reskilling, look at the odds stacked against these teachers.

“They had to cover content development all over again. By that I mean: they had to work on a computer. Imagine a teacher living in a rural area, in a one-room house, with two children and her husband and in-laws and having to work on a computer six hours a day – it would be highly exacting on mind and body. That is the logistical problem.

“And they do not know how to operate computers all that well. If their laptop develops a problem, they have to debug it remotely. There were a lot of such issues. But reskilling was hugely important, and they understood it. Many of our Asha teachers are now a lot more comfortable with computers than they were ever before – be it sharing something on Google Drive or accessing information on the Internet.”