



2020: A Year in Review



Adapting to a Global Pandemic

COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown in India hit Akanksha families hard. The primary concern with schools being shut down was ensuring the well-being of students and families. With many working as daily wage earners and losing their livelihoods, the impact on their lives was compounded. Recognizing our role in the communities we serve, Akanksha launched Project Karuna (Compassion) to support the immediate needs of our most vulnerable families.

Through staff, social workers and volunteers, Akanksha teams distributed humanitarian aid in the form of dry goods and medical supplies to nearly 7,800 families in Mumbai and Pune during the most difficult period from March to August 2020. The team continues to support vulnerable families and alumni in need on an ongoing basis.

- **Remote Learning**

With schools closed because of the lockdown, the Akanksha team's focus was to ensure that students continued to learn safely at home with minimal disruption. The switch to remote learning was quick and, in many cases, exposed challenges the students faced, including lack of devices and internet access. With the real risk of a widening digital divide, threatening to slow the progress made over several years, we knew we had to take extraordinary steps to ensure access to learning. The focus shifted from brick-and-mortar classrooms to tablets for remote learning. Through generous donor support, we provided 1,500 tablets for students in Grades 9 and 10. Students in Grades 7 and 8 were prioritized next. As a result of this push, a total of 2,675 tablets were provided with internet access to nearly 12% of students.



Students are attending synchronous online classes through Zoom, WhatsApp, google meet. Asynchronous assignments are being submitted through WhatsApp google classroom, Edmodo and WhatsApp.

Parents were also critical partners in supporting learning for younger students. Teachers actively worked on engaging students through online learning and approximately 53% of students participated with an average of 48% submitting assignments.

In many cases, the low attendance and submission rates were due to limited access to devices or children being left unsupervised at home. The team has been working on ways to increase participation with measures like a student buddy system, creating virtual student councils and providing parents with additional support and dialogue to improve outcomes.

- **Community and Parent Engagement**



An important element of supporting student learning is supporting family well-being and the economic resilience of parents and family members. Throughout 2020, with many caregivers losing their livelihood, we supported parents through re-skilling, sharing job opportunities and information on welfare programs. Monthly training programs for physical and mental well-being were offered with several thousand parents in

attendance. 2067 parents were surveyed and we learned that approximately 40% of families had a loss of employment, and nearly the same number reported not having a steady income. These responses helped plan next steps including collaborating with ICICI Foundation for financial literacy and Haqdarshak, an app that provides easy access to government welfare schemes. To date, close to 3,000 parents have downloaded the app, more than 400 parents have availed benefits of the government welfare schemes and 271 parents have completed skill-building training. Akanksha is piloting a tech based parental engagement program in 17 of our Akanksha schools, for our kindergarteners, in collaboration with an NGO called Rocket Learning, providing access to age-appropriate foundational learning and envisages increase in learning outcomes of children and increased parent participation in the learning of children. The Akanksha schools have shown an activation rate of 93%, defined as any parent that has submitted and responded to activity at least once. The platform tracks submission made by the student/parent as a measure of engagement and we are currently tracking a 65% engagement rate.

- **Supporting Akanksha's Alumni**

The focus of the Alumni support and engagement program was on career and college counselling for alumni and ensuring they have access to financial aid for college tuition. 58% of alumni have been admitted to undergraduate programs and 77% of alumni were admitted to junior colleges and 98% of students receiving career counselling in grade 10.

- **Prioritizing Socio-Emotional Learning**

One of the hallmarks of Akanksha schools is the focus on socio-emotional learning. Students benefit from arts, sports, music and photography clubs and mentorship opportunities. We strongly believe in focusing on whole child development, rather than a singular academic focus. On average,



25% of instructional time is spent on these activities.

Student's socio-emotional needs were a big part of the COVID response, with bi-monthly check-in calls from the staff and teachers to 60-70% of our students on a regular basis, adding up to 95,000 wellness check-in calls. The staff received training from a social emotional education program designed by Emory University in Atlanta, GA and were able to identify cases of abuse and support victims by providing access to social workers and counsellors as needed.

At Akanksha, we also prioritize building a culture in our schools where students and teachers value their roles, feel supported and encouraged. A survey of teachers and randomly selected students carried out in March 2020, representing 88% and 30% of each group respectively, showed that 18 schools have a good or excellent culture.

- **Art for Akanksha**

Akanksha's Art program is an important tool allowing students the freedom of self-expression through Art. During the past year, the Art program was even more important with students deprived of the safe space schools provided. With the pivot to virtual learning, the Art team provided students with art kits and a daily prompt to create art as part of [the Akanksha Art challenge](#). The kits contained basic material like crayons, pencils and paints and allowed students to share their feelings through art. Student drawings and paintings showed the isolation and disconnect many felt in the early days of the lockdown and were compiled into a [Little Book of Akanksha Art](#) to memorialize this time.



- **Teacher/Staff Support**

We prioritized training and support for our teachers to ensure they were comfortable teaching remotely. School Leadership and teacher retention rates remained at 99% with 4.5-year average tenure period for staff. To support staff and keep morale high, quarantine-time entertainment, awards and recognition and professional development opportunities were offered. A partnership with Coursera helped in skill-building and coping techniques. An employee culture survey was conducted in October which showed that comfort level with Work from Home is on the positive side with around 82% positive responses.

Academic Excellence

Akanksha students continued to excel in their academic performance. In the academic year 2019-2020, 99% of our students passed the Grade 10th State Exam (SSC). 96% of the 2019-2020 cohort went on to enroll in High School (Junior College, Grade 11th – 12th).

This trend carries forward for Akanksha alumni who appeared for their Grade 12 exams, with 17% earning a Distinction rank and 41% earning First Class.

A total of 209 Akanksha alumni appeared for the Grade 12th State Exam (HSC) in 2019-2020 of which 94% cleared the exams.

Akanksha students and alumni continued to outperform their peers in government schools in Mumbai and Pune.

Creating Systemic Change

Akanksha's approach is known to be successful in improving learning outcomes. We shared our model with schools and communities across India in the following ways:

- **Training school leaders in Pune with our School Leadership Academy**

Akanksha's School Leadership Academy has been training school leaders to be changemakers. A partnership with the Pune Municipal Government led to a multi day workshop for principals and head teachers in Pune. A different approach was taken to reach 150+ educators in 20 states offering training through webinars. These efforts amplify our work and bring Akanksha's proven model to many new schools and cities.



- **Providing Art Curriculum to all Government Schools in Mumbai and Pune**

Through a partnership with Leadership for Education, our Art program was shared with all Marathi-medium schools in Mumbai and Pune. More than 200 of our Art lessons were also made available to students across India through the Indian Government's education app, *Diksha* which is being used by 25 million students and 800,000 teachers in Maharashtra.

- **Socio-Emotional Learning training for Teachers in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh**

Akanksha's counselling team also led workshops on the importance of socio-emotional learning to teachers and caregivers in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. As a result of this initiative, 25,000 children will indirectly be impacted through the 539 teachers and caregivers oriented on the broader focus of SEL in child development.

- **Making the case for Art in schools at the InspirED conference**

The annual Teach for India conference which brings together a variety of stakeholders to discuss issues related to education in India gave Akanksha the opportunity to showcase our Art program and [makes the case for integrating art in schools](#).

- **Learning through Radio programs**

A radio-based program through a partnership with local radio stations allowed educational radio episodes to reach hundreds of families in Mumbai and Pune. This approach has been shared through a collaborative platform for educators during the pandemic, allowing Akanksha's radio program to be a model by educators around the world.

Updates from Akanksha Education Fund in the U.S.

- **Engaging with our Akanksha Community**

Throughout 2020, our donors hosted awareness events, where we introduced several new communities in New York City and in Short Hills and Princeton, NJ to Akanksha's work. The events have been wonderful cultivation opportunities that have yielded new donor and corporate engagement with Akanksha's mission. We are looking forward to amplifying our message through such forums to reach new supporters in 2021 and beyond.

With the shift to virtual programming in 2020, we offered our key donors all over the U.S., the opportunity to take a closer look at our work through ongoing virtual events.

- In **May '20** we presented a closer look at how COVID impacted our work in India. Attendees heard how important our social work programs were during the pandemic from one of our lead counsellors.
- In **June '20**, we invited all our corporate supporters for an update on the situation in India. The session was led by the Board Presidents of India and the US.
- In **October '20**, we featured our Art for Akanksha program and how it has provided not just a creative outlet for our students, but also a means of employment and livelihood. This is an aspect of Akanksha's work that sets it apart from other organizations.
- In **December '20**, our Akanksha community was invited to hear from Aditya Natraj, a Board member from the Akanksha Foundation, on the implications of India's New Education Policy – a national policy aimed at making systemic, long-term changes to the education landscape in India. Attendees learned about the policy's focus on early childhood education and emphasis on socio-emotional learning, areas within which Akanksha has been active for many years.



- In **March '21**, we introduced our donors to our newest Akanksha alumni in the U.S. Four of Akanksha's star students have joined universities in the U.S. for undergraduate studies and these confident young girls shared their journeys with our community at a well-attended interactive virtual event. As the best testament to our work, these inspirational students shared the impact Akanksha has had on their lives and their hopes for the future.
- Together for Akanksha: A Virtual Gathering for the Akanksha Community**
2020 also required us to adapt our signature [annual gala to a virtual format](#). The gala was an opportunity for the Akanksha community in the U.S. to come together and reaffirm their support for Akanksha's work during what had been a particularly difficult time for our communities in India. Our Host Committee was instrumental in designing a successful virtual gala on short notice, and the result was an equally inspiring and moving experience. Several corporate sponsors also committed financial support for the event as in years past, including GEP, HG Vora, White & Case, Malabar Investments and Holding Group Capital.

Through the gala we focused on fundraising for the tablets our students needed for remote learning. The program featured voices of our students, alumni, teachers, counsellors, and donors in the U.S. Boman Irani, a Bollywood celebrity who attended the 2019 gala, returned to share a special message at the virtual gala. Bollywood actress, Nandita Das also shared a message underscoring Akanksha's commitment to equity in education.

The event was a success and brought over a hundred new supporters to Akanksha. Together with our Board, sustained donors, Host Committee, corporate sponsors and the many individuals supporting the event, we raised over \$500,000.

- Vivo Life partnership**



In late 2020, we launched an exciting partnership with UK-based health supplement company, Vivo Life. Vivo Life has created a new chai-based beverage and was looking for a nonprofit to donate the profits from the new product as part of its commitment to philanthropy. After a rigorous process to identify an organization whose mission resonated with the company, the [Vivo team chose Akanksha](#) for its focus on education as a driver of long-term sustainable change.

As part of the partnership, 100% of the net profits from the sale of Vivo's *Chaga Chai Latte* will benefit Akanksha's programs in India. We are thrilled to work with Vivo Life and for this partnership to grow! Learn more and [buy Chaga Chai Latte here](#).

- **New Executive Director starting March 2021**

Sejal Desai joined the Akanksha Education Fund as Executive Director.

Sejal is a business and community leader from Dallas, Texas with strong ties to Mumbai and India. Sejal brings over 30 years of business and nonprofit experience. Sejal is poised to lead Akanksha into its next growth phase as Gouri Sadhwani, Executive Director for over 7 years steps down.



Gouri has brought Akanksha Education Fund to the valued position we currently hold with our donors and peer organizations. She set us on a path to grow at an unprecedented rate allowing us to support Akanksha Foundation's ambitious goals. Under her leadership Akanksha Education Fund strengthened our internal governance and financial structures and initiated our now signature gala. We would like to sincerely thank Gouri for her leadership over the years.

- **New Members in the Board of Directors**

In March 2021, the Akanksha Education Fund Board welcomed two new members. Based in California, both Srividya Prakash and Nathalie Joseph bring their keen interest for Akanksha's work and years of commitment to the cause in their role as Board members. With two members of the Board on the west coast, we look to expand our presence outside of the New York area into new geographies and to growing the Akanksha community. Nathalie and her husband Leo Joseph are long time Akanksha Ambassadors. Vidya and her husband, Anirudh Samsi have joined Akanksha as Special Envoys. Both will play a critical role in bringing awareness of Akanksha to supporters in California.

- **Growing our Corporate Partnerships Portfolio**

In 2020, we organized several events showcasing Akanksha's corporate engagement opportunities. With targeted briefings in smaller settings, we were able to demonstrate the impact of Akanksha's work at companies like Google, HG Vora Capital, Mphasis, Microsoft and McKinsey. These events helped create awareness and often inspired many employees to become Akanksha supporters.

- **Akanksha Young Professionals Pay It Forward with our Alumni**

The Akanksha Young Professionals network has helped support Akanksha alumni studying in the U.S. through a mentorship program. The program was started in 2020 and is an ongoing support system for alumni as they acclimate to life in the U.S. and allow our Young Professional mentors to share their advice, expertise, and experiences as alums try to make the most of their U.S. experience. This is done through regular check-ins for each mentor/alumni pairing and with monthly group virtual hangouts, which are a combination of levity and socio-emotional support. Starting with 7 alumni-mentor pairings, the program now covers all 11 Akanksha alumni in the U.S.

The Young Professionals also created a handbook to serve as a resource to all alumni, covering topics like travel to the U.S., preparation before traveling, cultural norms, and ongoing advice on the practicalities of moving to the U.S. from India.

The Young Professionals network raised nearly \$15,000 through a “Back to School” fundraiser. With their network and reach, the group has been a strong advocate and a partner for the Akanksha Education Fund.

In 2021, the Young Professionals group is looking to expand the size and geography of its Board. They will also work closely with the team and Host Committee to ensure the success of the 2021 Gala.

- **Akanksha Alumni Head to U.S. Colleges**

Four Akanksha alumni arrived in the U.S. in January 2021 to begin their undergraduate studies at U.S. colleges. These students have been accepted into colleges with a full-ride scholarship from United World College. All four are first generation college students and represent the success of Akanksha’s model. You can hear from these students [here](#).

2021: Looking Ahead

We will continue to prioritize academic achievement, aspiring for a 100% student retention rate, especially in girls and a 100% school completion rate. We will adopt a **blended learning** model and strive to become 'best in class' in implementing most relevant technology based learning solutions for children from low-income communities. We will also set up systems to ensure students take an active role in their learning.

We will build on the current **socio-emotional learning** program and make it a key focus area for our schools while also supporting other basic needs like food and health. These programs will build a sense of security for students and support socio emotional development, while addressing brain development delays in early years.

Akanksha's **community and parent engagement** program has been and will continue to be a focus area for the organization. Supporting our most vulnerable families, focusing on community health and hygiene habits, and supporting the economic resilience of our families will remain our priority.

Additionally, Akanksha will focus on the following areas –

1. **Catching up with learning loss:** Most studies indicate that children have slipped far behind in the current year. And therefore, Akanksha schools will **prioritize** the curriculum skills that are MOST essential / foundational, **assess** all children to determine their learning levels, **remediate** using intervention programs in languages and math, **engage** with parents as co-educators to support with all of these.
2. **Expansion:** Akanksha will set up six new schools in partnership with the Nagpur city government. This is a unique partnership wherein the Nagpur city government will reimburse approximately 42% of effective cost per pupil, along with taking care of infrastructure, repairs, mid-day meals etc. Akanksha will be supporting the city government in improving the foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes for their 100+ schools over the next 4-5 years, indirectly impacting approximately 15,000 children.
3. **Research:** Akanksha will be partnering with **SEE Learning, India and Emory University, Atlanta** to identify the best methodology for implementing and scaling the socio emotional and ethical learning (SEEL) curriculum designed by Emory University's Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics.

**Thank you for supporting Akanksha!
Look forward to more progress and growth in
2021.**



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