

Catalyst⁷

CHANGE TAKES SHAPE THROUGH PERSISTENCE

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Greetings,

As we look ahead to this year, brimming with promise and potential, I am inspired by the extraordinary journey we have shared to make a lasting difference to the society. Over a decade, our collective efforts in the realms of mental health, menstrual health and education have reached over 20 million individuals, fostering awareness, understanding, and support where it is most needed. By breaking the stigmas and encouraging open dialogue, we are motivating people to seek the help they need to build healthier communities.

We are committed to expanding our reach and creating transformative experiences for millions across India and Asia. Whether by enhancing access to resources, empowering communities with education, or nurturing supportive environments, our approach has always been to spark momentum where it matters. It is an ongoing endeavour to be the catalyst of change, and we are determined to keep chipping away at this resistance in our humble way.

By constantly bringing together multiple stakeholders, whether NGOs, doctors, academia, or government bodies, for various programmes, we aim to consistently work on the path of purpose and possibility. Our focus is on driving transformative action in the areas of health and education to shape a better future for people across different social classes in India and globally.

Warm regards,



Mrs. Neerja Birla
Founder & Chairperson
Aditya Birla Education Trust





Ujaas: And Then There Were Men

When my youngest daughter, Advaitesha and I discussed the foundation of Ujaas, the reflections and findings shared by those engaged on the ground helped us uncover an aspect that is frequently overlooked. At its core, Ujaas is about fostering awareness and empowerment, focusing on equipping adolescent girls and women with the tools to navigate menstrual health and hygiene confidently. We realised that while women bore the brunt of menstruation-related challenges, men, who happen to be key stakeholders in the process, were often left out of the conversation entirely.

Ujaas evolved out of a realisation that meaningful change requires inclusive conversations. With a focus on creating spaces where everyone, men and women alike, can engage openly, Ujaas aims to bridge the gap in awareness around menstruation. Despite their central role in shaping attitudes and providing support, men rarely had access to the kind of education or dialogue needed to understand menstruation. This gap became impossible to ignore, and it was clear that addressing only part of the challenge would limit progress. Ujaas emphasises work at the grassroots, where even the smallest changes emerging from community-driven awareness can create ripples of lasting impact.

Ujaas saw remarkable engagement from men, with participation in Self-Help Group (SHG) sessions having seen a growth of 8% in FY 2023-24. These sessions delve into the nuanced roles men can embody, not as passive observers but as active supporters. With a total reach of 6 lakh individuals, Ujaas sensitised over 40,000 men, inspiring them to adopt a more empathetic perspective toward the women around them. Over time, we noticed changes taking shape, awkward silences replaced by thoughtful discussions, and moments of hesitation giving way to quiet acts of understanding.

The real impact comes from individuals who internalise this understanding and quietly bring it to life within their communities. Take Hasam's scenario, for example. In Haryana, 26-year-old Hasam found his own way to address misconceptions. With support from Ujaas, he and his team created street plays that spoke directly to young audiences. These performances opened doors to conversations about menstruation that many would have otherwise avoided, encouraging curiosity and new perspectives on a topic that is often kept out of view.

In Gujarat's Banaskantha district, Sachin Panada was raised in a milieu where discussions surrounding menstruation were largely absent. Inspired by an Ujaas session, he began speaking with local elders and encouraging the use of sanitary pads, sowing the seeds of a more progressive and open-minded community outlook.

These pursuits served as a catalyst for open discussions about menstruation. Sachin and Hasam's stories became a spark within their own families. The women in the family, who had always felt hesitant to talk about menstruation, began an open conversation and shared insights from their own experiences, bringing light to something that had long remained in the shadows.

Strong Minds, Stronger Wins



Athlete Mind Performance - Resilience Breeds Champions

The launch of Athlete Mind Performance (AMP) has been a profoundly personal milestone. My own journey with physical activity, whether cycling, trekking, or climbing mountains, has always been closely linked to my mental well-being. I have experienced first-hand how movement strengthens both the mind and body. AMP was born from the belief that mental fitness is essential for athletes to perform their best on the field and beyond.

When we think of athletes, we think of champions. Their stories inspire us. But behind every podium finish is an untold journey of immense mental strength, the ability to stay focused and composed under pressure. Research reveals that 21% of athletes experience anxiety disorders, with 33.6% showing symptoms of anxiety or depression and 50% facing depression after sport-related concussions. While we focus on physical endurance, technical skills, and nutrition, the last piece of the jigsaw, i.e. the athlete's mental health, is missing. That is exactly what AMP sets out to do. It offers a space for athletes to build mental fortitude, a core part of their performance journey.

The core of our programme ensures that athletes, particularly those starting young, have the tools to handle the pressures of competition and the weight of expectations. Our approach begins with outreach and awareness, which is critical in a country where the concept of sports psychology is still relatively new. We conduct workshops for athletes, parents and coaches to demystify mental fitness and highlight its importance in performance. These experiential sessions encourage participants to engage in practical exercises, introducing them to key mental training techniques such as visualisation, mindfulness, and managing performance pressure.

Once the awareness has been established, the individual consultation and assessment sessions allow us to understand each athlete's unique needs, whether managing performance anxiety, building resilience, or overcoming self-doubt after an injury. For younger athletes, the process involves working closely with parents, ensuring they are equipped to support their child's mental fitness journey.

Mental training is not a one-size-fits-all approach; hence, the interventions must be tailored based on the athlete's sport, level of competition and specific challenges. I have always believed that sport has the potential to do more than bring medals home. It fosters determination, creates shared identity, and bridges divides. The mind is, in many ways, the final frontier in sport. It is where battles are won or lost, often before a game/match has even begun.

The mental fitness of our athletes must be seen as essential to their preparation. The road ahead is long, but having sports stars like Sania Mirza, Abhinav Bindra, Aparna Popat, Pullela Gopichand, and Sourav Ganguly voice the same thoughts is one step towards embedding this holistic approach into sports training in India.

Whispers to Wellness



Project Samvedna: Hope in Every Hamlet

As I reflect on our journey with MPower over the last few years, I often find that targeted interventions through public-private partnerships can bring about enduring social change. Project Samvedna, born of such a public-private partnership with the Government of Maharashtra in India, has made mental health support more accessible to communities across the state. Between April 2023 and November 2024, the initiative engaged over 8 lakh individuals through 12,210 awareness sessions. These efforts were complemented by clinical care, more than 2,000 psychiatry consultations and 1,200 counselling sessions. This extensive outreach reflects a measured approach to mental health care in Maharashtra's rural areas.

At its core, Project Samvedna integrates awareness, early identification, and clinical care. One of the earliest insights from the project was the extent of unmet needs, as stigma often prevented individuals, especially marginalised women in lower-income strata, from seeking help. Determined to address this, the initiative began with community-level awareness sessions, gradually building momentum for more comprehensive and continuous mental health support.

Screenings at Public Health Centres (PHCs) across 32 districts followed, identifying that 6–8% of participants required immediate attention. Our journey commenced in regions such as Jalna to gauge the response of underserved communities to this initiative. In Jalna alone, more than 7,000 psychiatric consultations and nearly 2,000 counselling sessions have been conducted, reflecting the initiative's profound and tangible influence at the grassroots. By facilitating seamless connections to professional care, the initiative underscores the importance of proactive and empathetic mental health interventions that help with the reduction in self-harm and suicides.

This year, the programme expanded its footprint from operating solely in Jalna to 31 additional districts, supported by 375 volunteers and 45 fellows. Initially relying on referrals and a helpline, the programme has evolved to include outbound calls and referral tracking. Improved collaboration with district mental health hospitals and the district mental health team of the government has led to 7 out of 10 patients in some regions being referred through Project Samvedna, reflecting a growing synergy and effectiveness in addressing mental health needs.

The initiative also delivers a tangible economic benefit, enabling individuals to save between Rs. 3,000 and Rs. 8,000 annually while reclaiming approximately 130 productive hours each year. As it extends its reach across Maharashtra and into states such as Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and Punjab, the programme continues to be guided by its partnership with the government, ensuring that public health priorities align seamlessly with community-driven mental health interventions of Mpower.

Through Project Samvedna and other endeavours, we have ensured that Mpower's interventions are aligned to contribute towards SDG- Goal 3 and are consistent with the WHO's Service Organization Pyramid Framework. My unwavering goal is to bridge the gap between awareness, which in turn encourages help-seeking behaviour, and treatment, enhancing crisis management capabilities. In keeping with the vision of SDG 3, we aim to "leave no one behind."

Empowering the Educators



ABEA- Train the Knowledge Givers

When we launched ABEA six years ago, it was driven by a simple yet profound belief, that the future of our nation lies in the hands of our teachers. They are the knowledge givers, the guides shaping tomorrow's leaders, and they deserve nothing less than the best tools, techniques, and opportunities to thrive in an ever-evolving educational landscape. While we seek the best for our children, why do we overlook the upskilling needs of those who deliver that knowledge?

Our answer was ABEA, an initiative dedicated to helping educators embark on the path of lifelong learning. Through customer-created and tailored courses, we set out to provide teachers with the tools to nurture their growth while fostering a more inclusive and forward-thinking learning environment for their students. This journey has been deeply gratifying. It brings me immense joy to see educators carve unique growth paths through our programmes, embracing change and innovation with open minds and resilient hearts.

Today, after training over 6.3 lakh teachers across 935 national and international schools, ABEA's resolve is stronger than ever. No two learners are alike, and neither are any two educators. Every interaction with a teacher evolved into a seed of thought and more research. Many times, it culminated in courses that were relevant, practical, and impactful.

Initially, an uncharted territory, the upskilling of teachers was not under the purview of the teachers themselves, let alone the partakers. Through detailed surveys and in-depth research involving lakhs of teachers, the key areas we identified as needing attention ranged from affordability and accessibility to specialised expertise in emerging teaching methods. The idea was to take the teachers beyond the traditional "chalk and talk" teaching methods towards more experiential and technology-driven skills that benefit them and the students alike.

With the support of some of the brightest minds in the education sector, we design courses and workshops that address real-world challenges. Each year, we refine our portfolio to meet teachers' evolving needs, offering programmes ranging from certified leadership training to innovative teaching practices. We also focus on areas like school enrichment models and the role of AI in education – ensuring that our educators remain at the forefront of the industry's advancements. ABEA engages with teachers at every stage of their professional journey

One of the most rewarding aspects of our work has been our collaborations with state governments and municipality-led schools, allowing us to achieve smarter teaching methods, more engaged classrooms, and empowered educators. In fact, our impact has extended beyond India, inspiring us to take our initiatives to countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Kuwait, Qatar, and Malaysia.

It takes a village to raise a child and a well-equipped, continuously learning village to ensure our future generations thrive. At ABEA, we remain committed to equipping this village, our teachers, with the best resources, knowledge, and support to stay ahead of the curve.