

# Catalyst

CHANGE TAKES SHAPE THROUGH PERSISTENCE

EDITION 3 | SEPT 2025

Warm greetings,

It has been a true pleasure to receive your continued support through the last two editions of our newsletter. As we bring you the third issue today, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the purpose and journey we embarked on at ABET over two decades ago, a journey that continues to evolve, grow and reach new milestones.



This mission has been shaped by the unwavering dedication of our teams and the shared vision of our stakeholders and each one of you has been a catalyst in driving meaningful and lasting change.

At the heart of our work in the social impact space lies a deep belief that creating lasting transformation is not only about addressing present challenges but also about paving a preventive and proactive path for the future. This two-fold approach underpins all our efforts in menstrual health, mental health and education.

It is this philosophy that has guided us in addressing rural India's period poverty by combining sustainability with livelihood and enhancing public school education through the capacity building of educators. Across all our initiatives, the focus remains on breaking stigmas and pushing boundaries through collaboration, community involvement, and innovation.

Be it fostering a supportive environment in our schools to enable early identification of mental health issues or providing structured mental health interventions for the youth at Kota, every step is futuristic in its intent and execution.

Each story of change in Catalyst is a shared one and we are grateful to be walking alongside those who believe in the same vision.

Warm regards,

Mrs. Neerja Birla  
Founder & Chairperson  
Aditya Birla Education Trust



## Sustainability and Gender Equality. Period

In December 2021, Ujaas was born out of a powerful desire for profound and meaningful change in rural India's menstrual landscape. It was a seed of thought, nurtured with vision and determination. Since its inception, Ujaas has been relentlessly striving to dispel stigmas and misconceptions, while also increasing the availability of sanitary pads to rural women in Maharashtra.

And early this year, the initiative took another leap. An organic, seamless broadening of horizons, with Ujaas Green. It began as a project to jointly address rural India's period poverty and gender inequality through three key pillars: Awareness, Accessibility, and Sustainability. Over time, it has evolved into a tool for empowering women economically and socially, driving grassroots change.

A forward-thinking, holistic approach is the cornerstone of Ujaas Green. While sustainability is key to positive Menstrual Health Management (MHM), period poverty is deeply rooted in the gender inequality that's prevalent in India's villages. In the absence of a competent mechanism, the disposal of plastic-heavy pads raised major health, hygiene and even environmental concerns. On the other hand, rampant unemployment rendered many women unable to afford sustainable menstrual pads.

Driven by the vision of my youngest daughter, Advaitesha, and under the aegis of the Aditya Birla Education Trust with the Gates Foundation as its funding partner, Ujaas Green was conceptualised as a 'Partnership to advance Gender Equality and Menstrual Health'.

It aims to implement healthier and more sustainable menstrual management practices using reusable cloth pads, while also enabling women within local communities to achieve economic independence and a voice that's no longer unheard. Ujaas Green was launched in Maharashtra's Jalna district, where Ujaas selected a group of 10 to 20 women from a Self-Help Group (SHG) to train them in making cloth pads, which can be washed and safely reused for up to a year.

As someone who has witnessed the endeavour take wings, Santosh Khandekar, Commissioner, Jalna Mahanagarपालिका, says, "Through the production of reusable, chemical-free, and environment-friendly cloth pads, this initiative is promoting both sustainability and women's empowerment at the grassroots level." From establishing small production units and distributing samples, to training these SHGs in social marketing, market linkages, and financial management, the programme adopted an all-encompassing approach from the outset.

The journey from idea to implementation was not without hurdles. One of the biggest challenges was to encourage young girls and women to make the switch from disposable sanitary napkins to reusable cloth pads. This was achieved through roping in Period Sakhis, a team of motivated women working tirelessly to encourage menstrual hygiene among the underprivileged.

At every step along the way, it has been our aim to be in alignment with WHO's Sustainable Development Goals. Be it promoting safe and sustainable menstrual hygiene products, empowering women economically and socially to advance gender equality, providing them livelihood opportunities through skill development and entrepreneurship, or supporting environmentally conscious practices to minimise the ecological footprint.

For many women, joining this initiative has been much more than earning a steady income. It has instilled a sense of purpose and pride in them. Anusaya Chapwar, an SHG member, shares, "I feel empowered knowing that the pads we make are helping women lead healthier lives while also promoting sustainability. Through the financial literacy sessions, I have learned how to manage my earnings and plan for a secure future. Today, I see myself as a small-scale entrepreneur, contributing to my household and community's well-being".

A few months into launch, Ujaas Green is now on the anvil of increasing its impact by including Maharashtra's Wardha district in its ambit. As the initiative spreads its reach, the vision is to make each community self-reliant, and also enable our rural women to become beacons of financial empowerment. It's not just about touching lives, but transforming as many as we can.



### Mpower at Kota

Kota, a city in Rajasthan in India, home to over a hundred institutes offering training in various competitive exams, experiences a heavy influx of students from across the country every year. However, along with being a cradle of academic ambition and excellence, it has also witnessed a disturbing rise in mental health issues, especially among students. Exam pressure, the fear of failure, and the burden of societal expectations make stress, anxiety, and depression alarmingly common. While many state government policies encourage educational institutions to implement mental health support systems for students, they are often hindered due to a collective lack of infrastructure, affordability and specialised expertise.

The figures are staggering. A survey of 2,072 students between the ages of 18 and 26, conducted by Mpower, revealed that 69% experience stress frequently, 56.5% have depressive symptoms, 64% struggle with low confidence, and 73.1% often have feelings of low self-worth. What's more worrying is that less than 10% of them seek professional help due to stigma, cultural beliefs, and lack of awareness.

It's in the light of these findings that, in October 2024, Mpower established a foundation in Kota. The aim was to provide structured and stigma-free mental health interventions in the city, along with raising awareness and encouraging people to seek help. What began as a rally to spread awareness has since evolved into a mass movement, bringing together all stakeholders, including students, parents, institutions, and even the general public.

Mpower Foundation's entry into Kota marks a pivotal milestone in its broader vision: To make affordable, multidisciplinary mental health services accessible to even the most vulnerable sections of society.

The foundation has adopted a multipronged approach. It has established a dedicated centre, which offers mental health services starting at just ₹100 (\$1.16). Our team includes Rehabilitation Council of India-registered clinical psychologists, who strive to ensure that no student is left without help. Furthermore, efforts are underway to align hostels, health NGOs, universities, and training institutes with our endeavour.

Recognising the significance of peer-driven mental health awareness, we have also introduced COPE Clubs, where student members receive Mental Health First Aider training. The purpose is to enable them to recognise early signs of mental distress among peers, offer support, and foster stigma-free conversations.

All mental health interventions need to be comprehensive. With this in view, there's continuous engagement with the local elderly population and children of defence personnel posted in the area.

Slowly but steadily, we have been witnessing encouraging signs. Since its inception, the foundation has helped more than 5,000 people across various sections of society, while our key focus area remains students. As we move forward, the immediate goal is to extend Mpower's online counselling services across Rajasthan.

Mpower Foundation is a result of the realisation that our student community urgently needs adequate resources to cope with their hurdles. Along with academic pressure and the burnout caused by extended periods of studying, many also suffer from emotional isolation and loneliness when they move away from home to pursue education. Left unaddressed, these issues could have a long-term impact on their mental well-being.

The youth of a country being crippled by challenges could have a profound impact on its future. Every initiative by Mpower aims to shape a transformation in India's mental health landscape. We may be taking one small step at a time, but each one is unwavering and unrelenting.



## Samarth: Shaping Change in Public Schools

"A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops".

This quote by American historian Henry Adams encapsulates the core belief of our Project Samarth.

Education is a teacher's pursuit of growth and learning as much as a student's, and it was COVID-19 that revealed to us the indispensability of empowering that path for our public school educators. Following this, we launched Project Samarth in 2021, during the second wave of the pandemic, as a three-year joint initiative between Aditya Birla Education Academy (ABEA) and the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's (BMC) Education Department.

COVID-19 brought about a radical shift in every aspect of life, including education. Suddenly, smartphones replaced blackboards, and online learning took over from on-site learning. The highlight of the new reality was, of course, virtual classrooms. Impeded by a lack of resources and limited prospects for capacity building, it became crucial to update the educators in Maharashtra's low-fee schools with timely and effective teaching methods.

The issue had to be addressed by the BMC, as it directly impacted the learning outcomes in the state. At Project Samarth, the action plan included six-hour training sessions for teachers from grades one to ten, along with regular supervision, assessment, and feedback mechanisms to ensure continuous improvement and skill optimisation.

Initial focus areas included guiding systemic changes to create inclusive classrooms, shaping the holistic growth of students, and enabling teachers to foster socio-emotional development and greater parental engagement.

The initiative reinforced the need for innovation and thinking in teaching and learning. Emphasis was placed on empowering educators to engage students more effectively, often through methods considered unconventional in a system that broadly follows the traditional path. For example, teaching Maths through music. Weaving musical notes and numbers not only crafted an easy and better understanding, but also ensured student focus and a longer attention span.

Improving the educators' understanding of foundational literacy in alignment with the National Curriculum Forum (NCF) 2020, integrating technology into teaching practices, enabling them to address gender sensitivity, updating them with advanced methodologies such as Bloom's Taxonomy, and providing support to students as counsellors were also the key aspects of the project.

We took our first steps with Project Samarth at a time when virtual learning was new to educators and students. It was a phase where students found themselves grappling with higher anxiety levels and reduced motivation as online learning replaced traditional classrooms.

Over the past three years, we have strengthened the teaching capabilities of approximately 1,457 educators across Mumbai's 24 wards.



## Intervention Should Begin at Schools

School children have been at the heart of MPower's core vision over the past few years. Our commitment has further deepened with mental health issues among children and adolescents fast emerging as a major challenge in India, as it is across the world. However, in an alarming reflection of global trends, mental health among children and adolescents has emerged as a major challenge in the country in recent years. According to a 2021 UNICEF report, one in seven of India's adolescents gets diagnosed with a mental disorder, and 56% report high stress resulting from academic and social pressures.

This is where schools, along with families, play a crucial part. No longer just centres of traditional academic learning, today's schools have to evolve into institutions that nurture a child's holistic development, supporting their physical, mental, emotional, and behavioural well-being. In a bid to empower them, the Government of India has taken several commendable steps, such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023, which include guidelines to promote mental health and mental health literacy among learners from the age of 3 to 18. In July 2025, the Supreme Court recognised mental health as a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution.

The intent is not the hurdle; implementation is. While physical education is part of every school curriculum, imparting psycho-social education remains a challenge due to multiple reasons: stigma, limited resources, and lack of institutional support.

It's into this void that Mpower introduced its Minds Matter (MM) Curriculum in 2020. A structured and scalable program that integrates mental health education across grades 1-12, it's designed to foster awareness, emotional resilience, empathy, and peer connectedness.

With most adult mental health problems stemming from childhood, the initiative's core motto is prevention over cure. While helping schools build a supportive mental health environment that enables early intervention, it also aims to normalise conversations around the issue in classrooms and homes.

The curriculum, designed by psychologists from Aditya Birla World Academy and Mpower, is based on two major theories propounded by renowned German-American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson: The Psychosocial Developmental Theory, which advocates age-appropriate emotional and identity development, and the Metacognition Theory, which enables better self-regulation and decision-making. It is also aligned with some of the best education frameworks in the world: WHO's Life Skills Education Model, global research on Social Emotional Learning (SEL), NEP 2020, and NCF 2023.

Focus has also been placed on teachers' capacity building through structured training and continuous mentoring. One of the key aspects of the curriculum is moulding educators into early identifiers of emotional and behavioural "red flags" in children. Interactive sessions are also held with parents to sensitise them towards their child's mental health needs at home and in school.

As a solution-oriented initiative, Mind Matters has included students, educators, parents, and school leadership in its programme. The aim is to achieve comprehensive and transformative gains by eliminating mental health stigma, promoting help-seeking behaviour, and nurturing a culture of holistic well-being in our schools. Moulding today's children into socially responsible and emotionally resilient youth, who will not only bounce back from adversities but also turn them into advantages, will shape their future, and that of the world at large.

Five years on, MM has reached out to over 50 schools across India and the Middle East, impacting more than 55,000 students and over 450 educators. At each school, the vision is to empower and enable them to run the curriculum independently and efficiently after the training. Change can begin with one, but ultimately, it must belong to all.