



## Going back to School A major step towards the new normal !

The Schools in different States of India reopened after being shut for months due to Covid pandemic. A major step towards the new normal. Most schools are re-

opening in phases, with limited attendance, social distancing protocols. Though there is a fear of a third wave in the near future, the kids' education weighed more heavily than the risk it involved. The data suggests that the zero positivity in the population is high and even if there is an outbreak of a new wave, we may not see the hospitalization and death that we saw in the second wave.

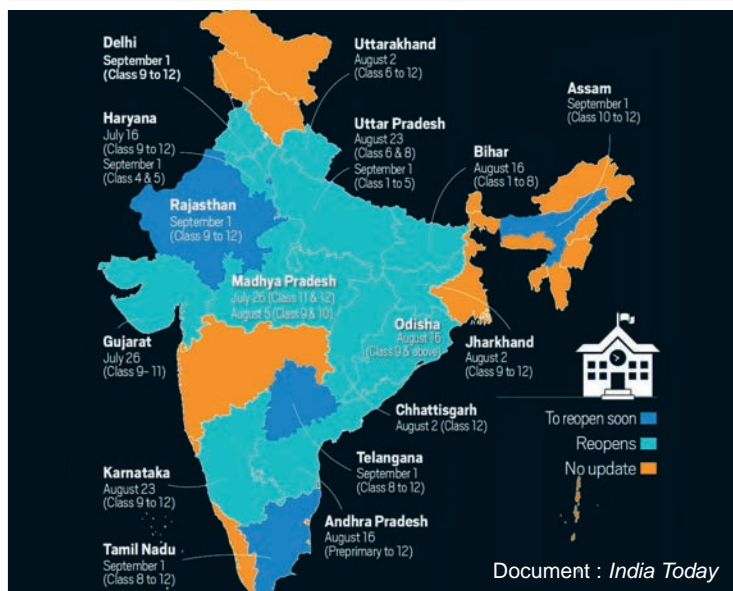
For many students the reopening of school was a necessity, to resume their studies without interruption. The online class has increased the divide between the rich and the poor. While private schools and their students

switched to online classes, government-run schools struggled. Their students, often with no laptops or smart phones and access to the internet, have fallen behind. Many even have forgotten the alphabets after 17 months. It's compulsory under India's education laws for schools to keep passing enrolled children until class five. The aim was to relieve pressure on children while providing a supportive learning environment. Schools have followed the rule this year despite the disruption in learning for so many students. The situation was the same for all the children in our project in *Tahirpur* Leprosy colony. Primary schools in Delhi have not yet reopened but our school supporting program in the colony has been open and children are attending the classes. It is a big relief for the parents and the kids are really happy to attend the classes. The inmates of the colonies were not allowed to get out of the campus during the pandemic and that helped them to keep the virus away. All the provisions, such as food, medicines, etc. were provided in their own places. While people were dying in *Delhi*, they were safer.

The pandemic has also widened the gender gap in learning. Many families chose to take care of their sons' education and sidelined the girls'. *Devi* (name changed) is one of many girls who faced the same situation in our St. Anthony's school. Her both brothers were given a smart phone and extra coaching to prepare for their exam. *Devi* didn't have a phone of her



In St-Anthony's School Dugawar, the students are coming back after a long period of absence.





Our School supporting program in the colony of *Tahirpur*, near *Delhi*, is active. However schools in the area are still closed. *Molly Sebastian*, project manager, came from *Belgium* to visit the children.

own and had to do all the household works. Like many, she didn't have the school books too. So, gradually she lost the connection with the online class and didn't manage to pass the exams. She was discouraged and didn't want to come back to school. We took the initiative to motivate her and get her back. In extremely poor communities, girls are already not encouraged to study. Once they leave school, it's hard to convince families to get them back in. We try our best to get the maximum drop out girls back. Some parents have shifted the school and put their children in the local Hindi medium to avoid the big fee due. Parents who deserve financial support are helped by us.

Lockdown had an adverse impact on girl children, pushing up incidents of child marriage and child la-

bour. It is illegal for girls under the age of 18 to marry in India. But the country is home to the largest number of child brides in the world, accounting for a third of the global total. In *Rahrai* project area we have noticed many girls below 15 getting married. Even one of our helpers in *Rahrai* school got her girl of 15 married in July. Lockdown and the less expense to have a wedding are the two main reasons for this increase.

« After two years, I returned to the project in the second week of September. It was a great pleasure to be back in the campus and to take back the life from where we left it. » Molly Sebastian.





### ***In our schools The Drop Outs and the New Admissions***

The intensity of this pandemic period is visible with the number of drop outs we are having in our *St-Anthony's schools*. In *Rahrai*, 40 % students have not yet got back to school even after two weeks of school reopening. In *Dugawar*, around 25% have not turned out. The main reason for their absence is the fee due. Many parents have removed children from our schools and send them in government schools in the locality. We have already waived off a big part of the fees, much more than what the government has asked to do.

By mid September, 120 new students were enrolled in *Rahrai* and 200 in *Dugawar*. Parents are still hesitating to bring their small children in the school in fear of a third wave. New admissions for smaller kids will be open for a longer period this year. If the situation continues to be stable, we expect to have many more students coming for admissions in this academic year. We had to refuse admissions to many middle-class students who came from local schools as they did not have the good base. This year it is difficult to take extra classes and integrate children from the local schools.

### ***Vaccination Drive***

Government has promised to vaccinate all the adults by the end of 2021. But questions remain over whether it will have enough doses. Based on 2011 census data for India, some 900 to 950 million people are 18 years and over, and therefore eligible for vaccines. So far, nearly 15 % of the eligible population is fully vaccinated with two doses and around 50 % with first dose. India is accelerating its vaccine drive to save off a third wave. Currently only people above 18 get the vaccination. *Covaxine*, the Indian made vaccine is still waiting for the approval of the WHO and is under analysis for the use of children in India.



In *St-Anthony's School Dugawar*, in the new colourful block, the smaller children are full of joy and energy.

Most of our staff are fully vaccinated and few are waiting for the second dose. Though the villagers were hesitant to go for vaccination initially, the second wave and the people who died of Covid during this period made them change their mind.

### ***5 Years since the first batch of our class 12 was out***

Five years have completed since the first batch of *St. Anthony's school of Dugawar* completed their higher secondary. Many well-wishers of *Anthony's bread* ask me about the students who passed out from *St. Anthony's*. Though it is difficult to be in touch with all of them as years pass by, we get news about them regularly. Many of them come back to school occasionally to say hello and some are keen to go to higher classes and motivate the students with their experience out in the world.

Government and public sectors conduct their respective competitive exams for recruitment of the candidates. After class 12<sup>th</sup>, candidates can determine their future career and start preparing for the various competitive exams that can get them a government job. These exams are one of the most sought exams in India and to crack them is a dream come true for many. The minimum educational qualification required will depend on the particular post an aspirant is applying for. Having a bachelors degree qualifies to many different posts. There are hundreds of thousands of candidates writing these exams every year and only the best ones on the top of the list get the job.

It makes us proud that many of our students already cracked some of these exams and already started working in the government sectors.

Some of you might be familiar with *Pallavi*, we had mentioned about her in *ACB-News 53*. She passed out in 2016 and got a job in 2019. She works for the central government, in *Delhi*.

*Kushi* came to meet us in the school two years back and she was so happy and excited to tell me that she has been selected by *WIPRO Limited*, an Indian multinational corporation that provides information technology, consulting and business process services. She was proud to tell us that the person who interviewed asked her in which school she had studied. *Kushi* is working, as project manager, in *Maharashtra*.

*Nirbhay* passed out in the year 2017, he recently got a job in Delhi Development Office. *Lalith* is also a batch from 2017, he is

working with *Indian AirForce*. *Deepender* is working in *Indian Postal Service* as Branch Postmaster.

There are many others who are already in different posts at different parts of the country. Doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, engineers, IT departments, private companies; they are working in many fields now. Few girls got married. Few of them are working with us as teachers now.

The fluency in English help them to succeed in these competitive exams. The hardship they go through in their early life helps them to be more determined to achieve their goals. Yes, our school has done its part to prepare them to compete with their counterparts from the cities and succeed ! In return, they make us proud !



Many former *St-Anthony's* school students, build their lives successfully like *Kushi*, *Pallavi*, *Nirbhay* and *Deepender*...