

SHAISHAV

Aaranyak - Concept Note

1. Introduction

Shaishav (meaning Childhood) works with children living in the slums of Bhavnagar, Gujarat, India since 1994. These children face all the challenges associated with slum life - child labour, child marriage, physical and sexual abuse, gender discrimination and substance abuse among others.

We believe that a child who brings about change *themselves* will enrich not only their own life, but society for generations to come. Thus, we work *alongside* children and they are directly involved in decision making and in running activities.

Shaishav has decreased the number of child laborers in our project areas of Bhavnagar by 78% in the past 3 years. With the near elimination of child marriage, over 15,000 children have enrolled in school over the past 25 years.

1.1 Background

Child development has begun moving towards a holistic concept emphasizing mental and physical health. Facing domestic issues, corporal punishment, inequality in access and opportunity to education, a marginalized child's potential to succeed becomes severely limited. However, mainstream education has limited or no participation of children, making it ill-equipped to deal with the issues of their day today lives. Our understanding of childhood started with the small window of putting kids back to school from vulnerable situations, but that has evolved over time. Starting from schooling and literacy, we have expanded our vision to life skills, empathy, value education and most importantly helping kids to design their own future for the betterment of humanity.

This is where we have conceptualized a new idea of holistic education. It's not a school, not an alternative school, not a vocational training institute, but **a learning space where children are leaders. They understand and learn about life, learn community living, respecting each other and the environment, where adults just facilitate the process and not hinder it. The kids get to decide how, when, where and from whom they want to learn. We call this space "Aaranyak"**. Here we do not follow any philosophy, but we follow children, and we believe that world change starts from children.

2. Aaranyak : An Innovative Child Centric Learning Space

Aaranyak is one of our Upanishads and means “the people who live in forest”. Based on the rich grassroots experience of over two and half decade, Shaishav is now taking a big leap and moving to a new phase of its work. After creating successful model in urban areas of Bhavnagar, Shaishav is now planning to replicate this work in the remote tribal areas of South Gujarat.

2.1. Aaranyak : An Alternative Learning Space :

We strongly believe that each child is UNIQUE, so their passion, learning styles, pace everything is UNIQUE. However, the opportunity to be unique is not given to children in the mainstream schooling system, especially to tribal children who hardly have access to education, leave aside quality education.

Shaishav intends to initiate an innovative yet sustainable model of education for tribal and other children through a learning and living space at “Aaranyak.”

2.2. Objectives

- Simple and Sustainable community living and wellbeing of everyone
- Create an understanding and respect for diversity in cultures
- Promote citizenship through the idea of ‘Think Global, Act Local’
- Create a Green and sustainable model of living and livelihood by using the organic farming, appropriate technology, renewable energy etc. and replicate the concept

2.3. Educational Model

Some of the specifics, given below, should form part of the learning modules and manuals

- The learning space will be semi residencial. The living space shall be simple and made from eco-friendly materials. The children can come for the week and leave on the weekend. Some children will stay on the Campus while there could be few day scholars too.
- We do not intend to follow any curriculum but children will be exposed to different perspectives and fields. We will use the NCERT and National Open School Curriculum only as a reference point but not strictly follow it.

- Children will learn independent living skills such as organic farming, eco construction, stitching, carpentry etc. along with soft skills such as writing an application, booking a ticket and so on. Emphasis will be given to life skills such as critical thinking, self-awareness, communications, interpersonal relationships, empathy to name a few.
- The children will design their own learnings. Children will design what they want to learn, how they want to learn, and their own pace. If they need any help or guidance, the facilitators will provide the same.
- The children will be encouraged to learn by experience. They can also learn from mentors who work in the field they are interested.
- Children can choose to prepare for 10th grade exams through National Open School but will not be forced to appear for or pass the S.S.C.
- Aaranyak will host visiting children to promote cross cultural learning among tribal children. Priority will be given to the children who are orphan and single parents as well as children of progressive parents who want to live alternative, simple and sustainable lifestyles,

2.4. Learning with Community Engagements

(a) Society as a Learning Space

- At Aaranyak, everyone in this world is a GURU, broadening children's mind's about whom they can learn from.
- The children will identify their own interest areas and we will help them identify mentors and practitioners who are experts of these subjects and either invite them to Aaranyak or send children to their mentor.

(b) Connection with Society

- The children will have a strong bond with their village and will take up projects in village for example community farming or kitchen gardening in various households. This would help in making the village stronger and bring the real Swaraj.
- Children will understand the socio-economic-cultural-political realities of one's village as well as the local governance system. They will learn the value of citizenship and will learn how to play an effective role in the local governance.
- Children must appreciate and respect the local culture so they also learn to preserve it and also enhance it.

3. Towards Self- Sustainability

Aaranyak will be a model of self-sustainability, showing children the value of independence. Organic agriculture taught under the guidance of Gujarat's many progressive farmers can show children how an ancient livelihood is evolving to match modern times and culture. By showing them how to choose livelihoods which build from local resources, which are environment friendly and benefit local communities, children can learn alternatives to migrant labour.

3.1 Appropriate Technology, Renewable Energy, and Environment Conservation

Aaranyak recognizes the importance of preserving our environment for future generations. We will use renewable energy such as solar, wind mills, water harvesting to produce a zero waste and zero pollution model, encouraging clean living. Natural resources management will be given lot of emphasis to promote conservation of local environment. This model can be demonstrated with the surrounding villages.

3.2 Community and Simple Living

Aaranyak will operate on the value of **UBUNTU** which is an African Proverb and means **"I am because we are"**.

Humans are social beings and the roots of community living retains the values of co-living, empathy, mutual respect and tolerance. We dream to create a cedar of **"Good Human Being" and a sensitive community** who are living simple, sustainable, value based life which is enhancing peace and social justice. In short, we like to create a replicable model space which can demonstrate the healthy, simple, sustainable, environment friendly which is in context with local socio-economic-political and cultural specific. Aaranyak will be a place where children can

- Learn to nurture nature and optimize use of local resources
- Develop interdependence and learn to empathise respect each other who may have different background or personality
- Open classes to facilitate self-learning and peer learning among children
- Understand origins of civilizations and thereby understand diversity

4. Cross-Collaboration

4.1 Strengthen Local Ashram Shalas

In tribal areas there are many *Ashram Shalas* (residential schools) for tribal children. Cross-collaboration, trainings and exposure visits can simultaneously improve both their methods

and Aaranyak initiatives. In past, we reached out to government schools through our Mobile Resource Center which we will replicate in these *Ashram Shalas*.

4.2 Linkages with Progressive Private Schools

Many progressive private schools are in favor exposing to their students to different ways of living. Such collaboration can reduce divisions due to urban – rural cultures, caste, economic status, creed, and religion. It will help children from diverse backgrounds to understand the realities, learn and understand each other with empathy.

4.3 SETU : Child Rights Resource and Training Center

Aaranyak methods will be added Shaishav's SETU, where we are documenting our experiences and learning through booklets, Teaching Learning Materials, training modules. This is to provide training to various stakeholders, conduct action research, network with like-minded organizations and work for policy change for more child-friendly policies. SETU will also develop a cedar of child rights activists from grassroots to the higher level.

5. Integrated Learning Opportunities for Adult Learners

5.1 Short-term Courses, Camps and Workshops

- Aaranyak is child centered place but it is open for adults also such as youth, parents, teachers, activists working in different organizations etc. Such courses can be offered to them as well. Some examples of such courses are as follows:
- Nature Connect where they understand the value of sustainable and simple living
- Rethinking Development where they can understand the present model of Development and think about alternative model
- Leadership Development through Adventure
- Child Rights, especially Right to Participation
- Personal Safety for Women and Girls

6. The Facilitators

- To create this learning space, we want facilitators, who are passionate about learning, understand self designed learning, ready for co-creation and willing to live simple and sustainable lifestyle. Previous experience with children is great, but not necessary.
- We also need committed team who knows about Organic Farming, Appropriate Technology and renewable energy etc.

7. The Infrastructure Requirements

- We believe that if we want to create a learning space, it must be done in rural/tribal area. It creates atmosphere of freedom, acceptance, creativity, curiosity, abundance, cyclicality, etc.
- For implementing this project the first and foremost requirement is a piece of land where we can host all these activities. We need minimum 5 acres to maximum 10 acres of land. For the construction purpose the land requirement is not much high but if we have more land, we can use it for organic farming and be more self-sustainable by growing more food for the children.
- We want to create a small, simple and eco-friendly learning campus, which includes:
 - Living spaces for children and facilitators.
 - Resource rooms and activity rooms.
 - Library
 - Laboratory
 - Computer Lab
 - Training space with accommodation facilities
 - Common kitchen and dining area
 - Organic Farm and tree plantation
 - Playground
 - Prayer Hall cum Common Meeting room
 - Store rooms

8. Conclusion

With this new approach of education, we hope that children having strong roots in their community would help stop forced migration and preserve local indigenous knowledge and skills.

9. Opportunities for Involvement and Partnership:

- ❖ By way of donating about 5 to 10 acres of land for hosting the campus facility in the tribal area in South Gujarat.
- ❖ By way of Sponsoring one or more of the capital expense for Construction of Green Buildings
- ❖ Support us in installing various Renewable energy technology such as solar, wind mill etc.
- ❖ Support us to design and construct various environment friendly techniques such as Composting, Rain Water Harvesting, Bio Gas etc.
- ❖ By way of contributing to the general corpus of the project.
- ❖ By way of creating mutually agreed purpose corpus fund in memory of your family members
- ❖ By way of sponsoring some of our infrastructural, furnishing and equipment requirements
- ❖ By way of donating your products that will be useful for our Project

- ❖ By become a team member if you have passion to for an alternative and sustainable lifestyle for short or long time.
- ❖ By becoming a Volunteer for Aaranyak and contributing for some time and teaching children some skills that you have
- ❖ Be a virtual volunteer for 1-2 hours a weeks for the project for specific responsibilities to be discussed and agreed upon.
- ❖ By being in our support structure, to give us feedback and give critical suggestions.

For feedback, questions, concern about this concept, please feel free to connect with Falgun at falgun@shaishavchildrights.org or +91 98252 09679 or Parul at parul@shaishavchildrights.org or Isha at isha.shaishav@gmail.com or at +91 93764 28560. For more information on Shaishav, please visit <http://shaishavchildrights.org/>.