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Chapter 20

Underprivileged Children and COVID–19: Visamo Kids Case Studies in Ahmedabad Shelter

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic has disrupted lives and is continuing to affect the right to education across the world; a shelter home housing underprivileged kids in the state of Gujarat is no exception. The crisis that hit the world unannounced, and led to hurried closing down of the educational institutions for indefinite periods. After a hiatus, a new mode of imparting education was sought to be adapted—the online mode. And the inequalities in access to education were striking. With online education becoming an only way to maintain continuity, the fragility of the public education system and institutions that were under funded became vivid. The pressure on the parents, educators, and administrators increased manifold. A tiny section of students at a shelter home in Ahmedabad—the Visamo Kids Foundation—endeavoring to access quality education in the finest English medium schools under RTE, were marginalized and deprived of their right to access to quality education.

INTRODUCTION

“I missed my friends a lot. Since childhood, we have been together and suddenly got separated for almost two years. I can live without parents but not without my friends now.” A young Jiya who dreams of becoming a physiotherapist describes her feelings sitting in her room at Visamo Kids Foundation. She adds, “We are having a lot of fun as we are together after almost two years.” India has been one of the hardest hit nations by the Covid-19 pandemic. The total recorded cases have crossed 43 million in the United States. India also has recorded the highest number of deaths caused due to Covid19, which has now crossed 520,000 (*Coronavirus (COVID-19) Cases*, n.d.). While children have been observed

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to have lesser health risks, the pandemic seriously impacts their well-being. The harmful effect is expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, neighborhoods, and those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations (UNSDP). There are several childcare homes taking care of underprivileged children across the length and breadth of India. This study revolves around the personal experiences shared by the children studying in various top-notch schools of Ahmedabad facilitated by an NGO, Visamo Kids Foundation.

BACKGROUND

During the lockdown in 2020, the schools closed abruptly, and all the children were at the shelter home. Maintaining social distancing as per the norms was becoming a challenge. The non-residential staff found it difficult to reach the workplace owing to the imposition of a curfew. The institution was closed down, and kids were indefinitely sent back to their homes. From mid-April onwards, one of our partnering schools, DPS, Bopal, started their online classes, and soon enough, the other schools started virtual classrooms. We were faced with the challenge of providing access to online education to our students, who are now in remote villages in Gujarat. With the support of local NGOs, family members of the children, community members, Panchayats, and youth groups, somehow, access was ensured, though not for all.

The students of VKF are enrolled across 20+ schools under four boards (ICSE, CBSE, GSEB, and IB). Every school has a different pedagogy with diversity in the online platforms used. Access to a device, access to time for the use of the device for dedicated use for online education, access to a strong internet service, access to privacy, safety, access to an environment that is conducive to studies, access to warm meals and sanitation and many more factors started to impact the education of these kids. Gradually, as and when the situation started improving and depending on the case-to-case assessment of situational factors, feedback provided by teachers at school and of VKF, and recommendations made by the counselor, we started bringing the students back to the shelter home from September 2020 onwards. By January 2021, 14 kids were back at home. The maximum number of students was called back by mid-2021; after Diwali in 2021, 90% were on campus. Finally, in 2022, when the new session was to start, all the students were on campus. During their stay at their homes, the students experienced myriad life situations, and we have captured select stories by documenting 12 case studies. The names have been changed to protect their identities.

Context

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a contagious disease caused by a virus, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (COVID 19, 2022). The Covid-19 disease has been registered globally since its onset in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. The mass spread of this disease led to what came to be known as the Covid-19 pandemic. The world has changed post-pandemic compared to before the advent of this disease. Nearly half of the world's 3.3 billion global workforce risk losing their livelihoods (*Impact of COVID-19 on people's livelihoods, their health and our food systems*, 2020). The loss of an unprecedented number of human lives and the trauma following those losses has been enormous. This report intends to introduce the readers to the hardships faced, the social and mental impact of the pandemic, and the preference and high spirits of underprivileged children living in childcare homes. The childcare home in focus for this study is Visamo Kids Foundation, Ahmedabad. Visamo Kids Foundation

has created a facility that can house 100+ kids with the mission to transform the lives of less privileged yet high-potential kids through formal K-12 education in English (from classes I to XII) in partnership with the finest schools under CBSE, ICSE, and State Board (*Visamo kids' foundation*, 2020).

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1

Name of the child: Nayan Vasava
Father's name: Mansinghbhai Vasava, Illiterate
Mother's name: Muktiben, Illiterate
Year of joining VKF- 2012 Village- Gangapur, Tapi District
Class- XI- Commerce, DPS, Bopal, Ahmedabad

Focus is My Middle Name

I spotted Nayan for the first time when he was participating in an inter-school Carom competition. Quiet, thin in appearance, and bland, Nayan's presence was not registered by his opponents on the board till his skills made him the tournament winner. I also woke up to his special skills, apart from the facts that he was good at drawing and had the condition of dysgraphia (a learning disability of written expression that affects the ability to write, primarily handwriting, but also coherence). Nayan's father suffered from kidney failure and expired a decade ago. His mother had deserted the kids and eloped with someone. Nayan and his siblings (six sisters and one younger brother) were left with each other. The eldest sister did not marry, and their uncle supported the family.

Nayan's Lockdown Story

During the lockdown, he and his foi (aunt) engaged in several activities to raise money to support the family. They plucked minor forest produce- like tendu patta, mahua, and anwla and sold them. They worked in agricultural fields, and Nayan herded the cattle. One of his sisters suffered from sickle cell anaemia had a paralytic attack during the pandemic, and was treated in a Surat-based hospital. She died last year. The money raised was used partly to support the cost of treatment and partly to buy a secondhand cell phone, with which he attended online classes at his school. He completed Class X in 2022 and has secured 76% marks.

Case Study 2

Name of the child: Vali Bhati
Father's name: Dhanabhai Kanabhai, Illiterate
Mother's name: Jenniben, Illiterate
Year of joining VKF- 2013

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Residence- Street child- The family lives under a flyover near the IIM (A)
Class- X- Satyamev Jayate International School, Bopal, Ahmedabad

Resilience is My Middle Name

Vali is a child from the streets. The family lives under the flyover opposite the Blind People's Association, Ahmedabad. Her parents work as caretakers in the Hanuman mandir near IIM(A) crossroads. Her father sells coconut, flowers, and garlands. She has five brothers and one sister. All her siblings are either physically handicapped or mentally retarded. Vali has a hearing impairment in her right ear. She is excellent at painting and sports.

Vali's Lockdown Story

During the lockdown, she returned to the streets in Ahmedabad and spent time taking care of her younger siblings. She helped her mother in washing the clothes of her siblings. Her father goes to pluck the flowers (Aakda na Phool- for offering to Lord Hanuman), and she learned to make garlands out of them. She also kept the count while selling the garlands to the temple visitors. Vali is the only child without any deformities. During this stay at home, she learned to cook. She loved making chutney of tomatoes, khichdi, and jowar rotors (thick Indian pieces of bread made of jowar- sorghum) was the first time she bonded closely with her father and siblings. Her parents were amazed to see how Vali could communicate with her siblings- as their verbal expressions are different. Her elder sister is mentally retarded and quarreled with her, but once Vali came to VKF, she missed her and called her. Vali's father had collected bricks strewn here and there and made a makeshift home. During Dashama (a deity popularly worshipped in Gujarat during the Sravan maas) festival, she decorated the place of worship and painted the house's walls. She also continued her online studies while taking care of household work. Visamo collected cell phones in donations and distributed them to those who needed them. Within a few months, we brought back the child to the home, as it was becoming difficult for Vali to focus on his studies – she was in Class IX that year. She was associated with a mentor at Visamo and a volunteer to help her in Math.

Case Study 3

Name of the child: Anjali Dantani
Father's name: Pravinbhai, III Pass
Mother's name: Bhavnaben Pravinbhai, Illiterate
Year of joining VKF- 2016
Residence- Streets of Ahmedabad, Navrangpura area
Class- VI, Anand Niketan School, Shilaj, Ahmedabad

Steel is Her Middle Name

Anjali, a six-year-old girl found begging in Ahmedabad streets, was brought to Visamo Kids in 2016. Her father is a house painter, and her mother is a street-based sex worker. There are five sisters. Anjali

and her sisters were into begging while one of the elder sisters managed the siblings and the household work. Both parents are alcoholics. Her eldest sister was later married off and forced into sexual relationships with multiple partners. With the support and intervention of a local NGO (Slum Shine), Anjali's parents were convinced to send Anjali to Visamo Kids and continue her studies. She is currently in Class VI, in Anand Niketan School- Shilaj. When Anjali stepped into the institution to appear for the entrance test, she was so afraid of the formal setup that she started crying. So much so that she could not take the paper. The partnering NGO (Slum Shine) requested us to allow the kid to reappear in the test after a few days. The NGO provided roadside nonformal education classes to the children on the streets. This time, the NGO collaborated with a local school, took the kids inside the campus, and started providing classes in a formal setup. After a few days, they brought Anjali back to VKF, and she reappeared for the exam, was cleared with a good score, and was shortlisted for admission. During the final interview, her parents had come in a drunken state and created an uproar on the campus, threatening us with dire consequences if we retained the child. They were somehow managed and sent home. Anjali continued her stay at VKF. Having led six years on the streets, she hated the rules and strict norms of institutional living. She shouted, Howled, wailed, hurled abuses, and hit anyone trying to come near her. It took a few days for her to settle down. And after the summer / Diwali break was so difficult to bring her back to the campus. She pelted stones at our team members and needed to be forcefully lifted and put into the van. At times, there would be a crowd assembled of curious onlookers, trying to oppose our team members from forcibly taking away the child- as Anjali would make such a scene- which generated sympathy from the bystanders.

Anjali's Lockdown Story

This time, when the duration of her stay extended from one month to three when she was unable to join the school, when she was not getting a safe and clean home to stay in, regular hot meals, a warm bed, and a place to bathe and defecate, she asked her father to contact VKF and request to take her back.

Case Study 4

Name of the child: Janvi Varsakiya
Father's name: Devubhai Samjibhai Vasava, Illiterate
Mother's name: Dipuben Devubhai, Illiterate
Year of joining VKF- 2012 Village- Gangapur, Tapi District
Class- XI- Commerce, DPS, Bopal, Ahmedabad

I am Tough as a Rock, but I have a Soft Heart Inside

Janvi has two sisters and one brother. She had a habit of stealing things from school, from fellow mates at VKf, and even had stolen money from one of the international volunteers at the institute. Sharp, intelligent, and quiet in her ways, she regularly saw the counselor to get help to overcome her habits. Her mother is the sole earning member in the family. Her father is an alcoholic and stays in police custody

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for most of the year due to petty crimes. He would come home and impregnate his wife whenever he was out of lockup. Janvi's mother has applied for divorce, and the process is underway.

Janvi's Lockdown Story

When we asked Janvi about life at home during the pandemic, she was so overwhelmed with her emotions that she could not speak up, so she wrote down her experience on a paper and handed it over. "My family struggled a lot during the pandemic. Before the lockdown, my mother used to wake up every day before sunrise to make 'far batata' (a local cuisine- street food) –and later, go to the beaches of Dwarka (a popular pilgrim place in Gujarat) to sell them. During the pandemic, this business came to a standstill. She continued to make the food and sell it in the neighborhood, but her earnings were severely impacted. To supplement the income, she started sweeping the streets and was not ashamed to do so. Under the sun in the afternoons, my heart bled to see her working so hard to feed us. My brother, who was just ten years old, started working in a hotel to bring home money. I started taking private tuition alongside doing all household work to support my family. I have stayed away from home since a very early age. Life at Visamo is protected and very sheltered. These two years of Covid made me experience my family's daily difficulties. I learned how hard my mother works to ensure that I get a good education. My mother had back pain and had to undergo an operation. But she never told me this, fearing that this would affect my stay at Visamo and distract me from my studies. Due to the pandemic, I learned how tough life can be and how privileged I am.

Case Study 5

Name of the child: Preshita Parmar

Father's name: Vinod Kumar,

B.A Pass;

Mother's name: late Jyotiben Vinodkumar, VII Pass

Year of joining VKF- 2009

Residence- Pandad, Khambhat, Anand

Completed Class XII- Humanities from Anand Niketan, Satellite.

Currently studying Hotel Management (First year) at IHM – Delhi- Pusa Road.

Conquering Inner Demons: That's how I Meet Life

The mother had committed suicide while she was 11 years old - She was staying at Visamo Kids when the mishap occurred. Her father worked as a caretaker in a hostel run by the Catholic church in Dakor in the Kheda district.

Preshita's Lockdown Story

When the lockdown struck, initially, it was "I never got to spend time with my father. We cooked, cleaned the home, washed clothes, and cleaned the home. I also started online classes as I had access

to his phone”. But after a few months, as her father had to leave home to rejoin his work at the hostel in Dakor, she was left alone. “The home is very old and due to lack of maintenance- as no one stays here, there are ants all over, the walls are peeling off, and I felt very scared to stay here alone. I felt as if my deceased mother’s ghost would appear from nowhere. I learned to do all household chores by myself, which kept my mind off the fear of staying alone. I prayed for Visamo Kids to re-open and call me back. And finally, after nine months of self-quarantine in my home, I got to get back ‘home.’ Very few friends were called back, but I felt so relieved. I plunged into my preparation for the JEE for hostel and hospitality management and alongside preparing for boards (XII)”. Preshita has been admitted to the topmost hotel management institute, IHM, Pusa, after securing 1738 AIR (SC category) in JEE -- IHM. Preshita will reach Delhi on the 18th of August to complete the admission formalities and join the IHM. “During the pandemic, when I was alone in my home, I was petrified and depressed by the loneliness. The fear was, however, not real. It was like a demon in my head. Soon, I learned to cope with that by looking into the eyes of fear. Now I will be staying in the capital city of India all by myself. But I am very confident. I am dealing with my fear of the unknown very constructively. I have started working with an entrepreneur in Ahmedabad as a volunteer. Through my work, I am learning new skills, administration, people handling, data entry, record keeping, computer handling, etc. I am getting comfortable with speaking with strangers and responding to their queries. Pusa- I am getting ready to brave you!”

Case Study 6

Name of the child: Rajsi Chavda
Father’s name: Arjunbhai Virambhai, Illiterate
Mother’s name: Jeeniben Arjunbhai, Illiterate
Year of joining VKF- 2012
Village- Mekhdi, Junagadh District
Class- XI- Commerce, DPS, Bopal, Ahmedabad

My Identity is my Heritage: Rajsi’s Lockdown Story

“There is some problem in the child’s family,” said the counselor from Red Bricks School during a special online meeting we were summoned to attend with the class teacher and counselor. “Rajsi does not put on his video and audio. Once when the audio was on- as he was responding to my question, I heard the adults speaking at high volume- as if a conflict was going on. I kept probing Rajsi to share anything affecting him at home, but he is withdrawing. Please look into the matter urgently” We had another video call with Rajsi and asked him about the same. And what he told us was something we never imagined. Rajsi: “Ma’m, the general tone of speaking is like that only- very high- my parents were not quarreling- they were discussing something important.” VKF-“Yes, but why don’t you open the video?” Rajsi: “Ma’m, I don’t want my classmates to see the poor condition of my house. They see me as a Visamokid. They don’t know my real background”. VKF: “Are you ashamed of your home and parents’ background, Rajsi?” Rajsi: “No, Ma’m. I take pride in being their son. But there is no need to share your background unless needed. Not everyone will appreciate and understand. Also, whenever I opened my phone to connect with online classes, my cousins and other kids in the neighborhood would

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huddle to see curiously, peek into the class, and demand me to point out my teacher and my classmates. They are simply curious. But if I open the video, it may distract the whole class”. Identity building- Children take pride in telling that they are Visamokids. The alumni also take pride in sharing how tough life is for their parents and siblings at home. They know that they are no longer ‘underprivileged.’ They are far more privileged than those left behind at home in their villages. At a very early age, the kids of VKF shape their identities.

Case Study 7

Name of the child: Vikas and Suresh Damore

Father’s name: Jamubhai & Alambhai Gulabhai, Illiterate

Mother’s name: Lalliben and Motliben - Illiterate,

Joining VKF- 2016

Village- Junapani, Dahod District Class- VII- DPS, Bopal, Ahmedabad

Born Free

The selection process was going on. The panelists of the final interview, with the members of the interview panel, asked for the next candidate to be sent in. And in came a group of five adults and 13 children. Before the panelists could express their amazement and confusion, they sat on the floor. We requested the shortlisted children and parents to sit in the chair and meet the panelists. With great effort and hesitation, a selected few came forward. *Panelists:* So many? We asked for only one child and the parents. *VKF:* This is the family of one child only, Ma’m. The father has two wives, and together, they have 12 kids. Both the wives have come. And they have requested one child from each wife to be provided with admission- else no one will study. (Per policy, we do not give admission to more than one child from one family. Only ten kids are taken each year at home after an admission test, so the services should not be concentrated on a single family). Looking at the condition of the family members, the panelists discussed among themselves, appraised the situation, and made an exception to the rule. The families are

Vikas and Suresh’s Lockdown Story

The family is from the tribal belt of the Dahod district in Gujarat. During the lockdown, with the vulnerability increasing due to the shrinking livelihoods in the villages, one night, the animal stock was stolen from this family’s shed. This led to a huge fight between the father and other male members of this family with the suspected family, and in the conflict, a member of the suspected family died. Following this, the family had to flee the village and remain underground till the *khap panch* took matters into their hand and decided to a fine (monetary settlement of 5 L to be made by this family to the family of the deceased). The family took loans from private moneylenders and paid the amount within the stipulated time. During this period of hiding, the phones were switched off and sim cards removed/destroyed, so their hideouts were not tracked. The children could not attend online classes. The tutors (part-time hired personnel at the shelter home) could not connect with them to support them in ‘After school studies.’ Finally, after the settlement, the family returned to their house, and ‘schooling’ started. We provided

online counseling to the children to help them overcome the trauma they faced during uncertainty and fear. And after a few more months, they were brought back to the campus.

Case Study 8

Name of the child: Tejasvi Vala
Father's name: Jayeshbhai, B.Com
Mother's name: Anitaben, M.A, B.Ed.
Year of joining VKF- 2014
Residence- Ajak, Junagadh District
Class- IX- Redbricks school, Ahmedabad

With a Storm in My Heart, I Walk On

Tejasvi is a serious and studious child, with her mother working as a *gruhmata* (housemother) at the VKF. It is difficult for a child to stay in a 'home' where her mother may not be the 'assigned' *gruhmata*. The boundaries overlap- that professional and personal spaces intersect often. Within a few years, the mother, a survivor of domestic violence who divorced her oppressive partner before joining VKF, resigned from her job as a *gruhmata* from the VKF. She was ambitious and had completed her MA while working as a *gruhmata*. Now, she wanted to do B.Ed and appear for government jobs. She tried her luck but did not get a job of her choice. She was staying with her parents and brother's family in their village, and soon, she felt suffocated, unwanted, and like a burden in the household. She expressed her desire for remarriage, and through his contacts, the father arranged for her remarriage to another person, a divorcee himself, who was looking forward to remarrying. The marriage happened just before the lockdown, and she seemed happy to resettle. The child was happy to know that her mother does not need to stay at her parental home.

Tejasvi's Lockdown Story

During the pandemic, Tejasvi was excited as she met her new father and stayed in a new house with her mother. The new father's house looked affluent. But after a few days, we got a call from Tejasvi's school complaining about her irregularity and reluctance to put on the audio and video. Tejasvi was a hard-working student and used to score well. But in the first online exams held at school, there was a dip in the marks. The school team thought this was not unusual as the contexts have changed overnight, and many kids face difficulty in online education. But when we tried to learn about Tejasvi's new home (through a partnering grassroots NGO in that area), we realized that the new husband was even worse than the previous one. And that Tejasvi is extremely afraid of her new father. After a few months, we brought Tejasvi back to the shelter home. These children were, to date, not allowed access to phones in the 'home,' but after the pandemic, they were allowed to access phones, and we put in place infrastructure so that they have access to the internet. Once, a *gruhmata* found a cell phone charging on the terrace during her routine check walk. It was found that the phone belonged to Tejasvi. The trained mind of the *gruhmata* sniffed.

She was troubled, and she enquired about why the device was lying on the terrace and not in the designated charging station. And it was found that Tejasvi wanted to get updated about the day-to-day domestic activities at her new home to remain aware of her mother. And to get this information, she was taking the help of the back door neighbor, a young man several years older than Tejasvi. And in exchanging messages, the man proposed love to the girl, and she got involved with him deeply. Now, she wanted privacy to talk with that man and hence needed to go to the terrace without anyone knowing – under the pretext of washing/ drying clothes and would stay on the chat on the phone. Her marks in school dived low, and the daily reports of her mother’s plight made her depressed and all the more dependent on the newfound friend from her village. Once this was uncovered, the child was in counseling and daily conversations with the boarding In Charge at VKF. After the lockdown lifted in 2021, the mother of Tejasvi approached VKF and pleaded to be taken back as a gruhmata. She rejoined VKF as a gruhmata and also as a part-time tutor. She recalls the trauma and pain inflicted at her parental home and from her second marriage. She and her daughter attend the counseling sessions and try to embrace life again.

Case Study 9

Name of the child: Riya Nayak
Father’s name: Khodabhai Nayak, IX pass;
Mother’s name: Mayaben; VI
Year of joining VKF- 2014
Residence- Memnagar, Ahmedabad
Class- VII- St. Kabir, Naranpura, Ahmedabad

The Battles I Fight are Hidden in Me: Riya’s Lockdown Story

Riya’s mother works as a bus conductor/helper, and her father is a tempo driver. She has a younger brother, and she has seen her mother having fights with her daadi at home. The father is a peace-loving simple man and feels helpless amid the women fighting at home. During the lockdown, she came face to face with a fact that was kept under wraps. She caught her mother red-handed in an intimate sexual act with their neighbor, whom she used to visit frequently, to babysit their kid in the absence of the neighbor’s wife. Following this, she raised a ruckus at home, and soon, the daadi threw them out of the house, and they were deported to their maternal uncle’s house in a village. This severely affected the emotional state of the mother and, in consequence, had an impact on Riya and her online studies. During one of her interactions, the teacher of VKF came to know about this shift and how the child was deeply impacted. Riya was brought back to VKF when other selected kids were called back. She attended sessions (individual and group therapy) with the counselor at VKF. She has expressed her concern for her younger brother staying with her mother. The counselor informed us that she has built a fantasy world and is nurturing herself in that world. The child is under close monitoring and attends counseling sessions regularly.

Case Study 10

Name of the child: Riya Bilwal Father's name: Late Sh.

Ravikant Bilwal, B.Ed

Mother's name: Minaben Bilwal, XII pass Year of joining VKF- 2012

Village- Ratiya, Dahod District Class- VIII- DPS, Bopal, Ahmedabad

Handle Me with Care

Riya's mother is a child widow from the tribal belt of Dahod. Her husband died when Riya was 3 years old. Riya's father had appeared for a physical test the previous day as a part of recruitment in the police and had been put through rigorous physical activity. The next day, he suffered a heart attack and died. The young widow, with a small kid, felt helpless, especially when the jeth (elder brother-in-law) started making indecent approaches. The other members of her law's home wanted her to marry her elder brother-in-law and settle down- as per the norm in the community. She fled from her Sasural and came to her maiden home. No one in the family was ready to accept her back, as sheltering her would be like breaking the community's norms, which they could not put at risk. One of her relatives suggested she go to Ahmedabad and join VKF- one of the children from that village had been admitted to VKF a few years ago. Riya 's mother shifted to Ahmedabad and took up the job as a gruhmata at VKF. Riya was given admission to VKF and enrolled in DPS-Bopal when she reached the appropriate age. Since then, the shelter home has been their home. Meenaben- Riya's mother was a highly efficient and dedicated worker. With an eye for perfection, she came across as a stiff person with a non-negotiable approach. And she was hurt, pained, angered. She channelized her energies into work. But mes, she lost control over her emotions and would. We learned that at home – soon after the death of her husband, Riya used to get beaten up often.

Riya's Lockdown Story

During the lockdown, the mother-daughter duo left VKF, which was closed down, and stayed with a distant relative's home. Meenaben started doing odd jobs to put her time to use. Riya, by now, has developed apathy for her mother; the relationship was not peaceful. There were frequent fights, and Riya, now a teenager, started resisting her mother. By now, we had received requests from children from the streets of Ahmedabad to allow them to come and stay at VKF. But without support staff, we could not decide how to bring back the kids. The kitchen crew members were from Rajasthan, and the trains had not started. Who will run the kitchen? With Meenaben calling us to open up the living quarters, we got the answer. We requested she handle the kitchen temporarily until the kitchen crew resumes duty. She agreed, and we asked the other two girls to return to the campus. The boarding was sorted. But what about academics? With a break in studies, the three girls struggled to keep abreast with the school classes.

We looked for a local teacher who could come to VKF without being held up by the police (as the restrictions on mobility were still on) and teach the kids. We got the answer- an alumnus of VKF- having completed engineering just before the lockdown and still waiting for the job sector to start recruitment. The alumnus was asked to join as a private tutor for the three kids. Things seemed to fall into place. There was life flowing in the lonely corridors of the home. After a month or more, the tutor started complaining about their disrespectful attitude of Riya towards him. We asked Riya the reason behind her behavior,

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but she did not give any. We assumed that Riya is behaving this way due to the strain in her relationship with her mother and because it is not easy for the kids to attend online classes and stay locked in rooms with limited playmates and playtime. Little did we guess that the reason was something else. A bond was getting built between Riya's mother and her tutor. The tutor would visit them occasionally, even during non-work hours, and spend quality time with Riya's mother. Once, the girls found them in a compromising position. Once this came to our notice, we took stern action against misuse of the property, our trust, and affecting the girls, threatening their mental peace. After much talks with both parties, they made it very clear that they are serious about each other- but can't marry, as the community norms of the mother were highly restrictive. They decided to leave the shelter home and stay as living partners.

There was a lot of discussion on the child and her fate. Where will she stay during the one-month summer break or Diwali break when the shelter home is closed? What about Meena ben's association with VKF as a gruhmata? This is a residential job. What about her association as a parent? What is the status of her live-in partner- is he having a stable job- is he supporting the costs? Is he ready to take up the responsibilities of a teenage kid? Is the kid safe to be with her mother's lover? The questions remain. The child is in our custody. Meenaben has taken up two jobs (one day - babysitting and the other taking care of an old couple in the night). During vacations, Riya stays with her mother- goes with her to work during the day and at night. Our alumnus was facing ostracism from his family in his village when they came to know about this relationship.

Case Study 11

Name of the child: Hina Rathod Father's name: Late Sh.

Ravindra Rathod

Mother's name: Niru Rathod, XII pass

Year of joining VKF- 2003

Village- Vasadara, Anand District Amunus of VKF

Currently studying BA-FY at LD Arts college, Ahmedabad

Stays at VKF

My Experiences have Taught Me not to Subject Myself to Self-stigma

Heena is a special child; has studied from PRERNA- DPS Bopal till Class X. She could not complete XI XII from mainstream school and opted for appearing XII in Humanities from the Gujarat board as an external student. Her mother brought her to VKF after her husband died in an accident. Niruben got a job as a gruhmata at VKF. Heena completed XII and started studying in college. Being a dyslexic child, she found it difficult to clear her papers, and her graduation was met with breaks.

Heena's Lockdown Story

She went with her mother to her village post-lockdown, and the stay was extended indefinitely. Later, when VKF started opening up, she returned with her mother to the campus. After a few months, her mother found a suitable match for her and, with the consent of the elders of the family, finalized her again

(engagement) with the boy. A month ago, one fine day, Niruben came to meet us teary-eyed and said that the boy's family had called off the proposed marriage with Heena. On asking for the reasons, she said reluctantly that Heena was in a relationship for a brief time with some other boy from her village. This relationship grew when she went to her village with her mother for a few months. The boy started making some undue advances, following which Heena refused to continue the relationship with him and broke off the bond. But now, that boy has come to know about Heena's engagement and has sent some intimate pictures of Heena with him to the other boy, and the family called off the marriage. Heena, an otherwise bright, chirpy, helpful girl with good IT skills, suddenly shrunk with shame. She and her mother are seeking legal advice to combat cybercrime and are trying to move on. A local complaint in the village police station has been filed. A community meeting was held with the village and family elders. The smile is getting restored.

Case Study 12

Tales of Two Villages: Dharampur's Lockdown Story

Bhagwan Das comes across as a simple man from Tamachhadi, and a remote village tucked off in a Dharampur block of Gujarat. He looks simple but has a strong resolve to ensure his child gets an education. During the lockdown, three students at VKF from Dharampur were stranded in their remote village, 30 km from the district headquarters. There was no connectivity, and the boys had no one to turn to for help. The decision was taken after a meeting with the other parents. Bhagwan Das and his wife borrowed money, dug into their savings, pooled resources with the other families, shifted to Dharampur, took a house on rent, and subscribed to a strong internet supply. The online classes started after a tutorial over a video call. For months, the three kids stayed in that rented house under Bhagwan Das's and his wife's supervision.

Dang's Lockdown Story

Eight kids were in the district of Dang at the southernmost tip of Gujarat. In monsoons, the area is inaccessible due to the submerged bridges and several villages being cut off from the mainstream. During the lockdown, we thought of keeping a few children behind at VKF so that we provide them with remedial classes. Little did we know that what we assumed to be an interim phase was becoming the new normal. By mid-April, we were trying to connect with the district administration to get transport support to send the kids back to their homes. Finally, we got local help, and the kids were sent back home on the 16th of April 2020. Once the kids were safely reunited with their parents, we breathed relief. But soon, we started getting reports from the schools that they were neither attending classes nor available on their numbers. This was expected. Since Dangs comes under the forest division, internet obstructors are installed at several places in the district. The parents of these kids had to come to the district HQs to connect with VKF, as they had connectivity from there. Study material from school (online) was sent to the parents over WhatsApp. They would take printouts and go back. The children would study from their books and take the help of these online resources from school, solve papers/worksheets...and the parent would go back to the HQs to send over to VKF once a week. This continued for some time. Academics was getting affected. Some students walked up a distance to reach a hillock to get access to the net. The use of zoom / other platforms would soon discharge the phone, and the kids hardly got to

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attend all the classes without a charging point. One parent sent their daughter to another relative's family- where there was connectivity.

CONCLUSION

The stories are unending. They are appalling. Yes, we are celebrating the Amrit Mahotsav. But a look at the remote pockets of rural India fills us with despair. Even after 75 years of independence, many children are not having access to education. The divide between the rich and poor, haves and have-nots, is gnarling! Yes, every cloud has a silver lining. In this lockdown, the children at VKF recognized the value of their families. They were filled with gratitude towards their parents and siblings. They acknowledged the privileges they received as part of the Visamo family. Help poured in from different places, 8in the form of volunteering, financial and emotional support, and kind support. Red Bricks school, e.g., had sent eight sets of PC, keyboards, mice, headphones, and subscriptions for the internet for eight of our students studying in Red Bricks to ensure that their online education is not affected. The teachers of VKF and the schools made superhuman efforts to communicate with the families of every child who missed classes. Any misbehavior by a student during online classes was diligently handled and reported to help us nip the problem in the bud. Young college students across the nation formed volunteering groups to provide online tuition to children from underprivileged backgrounds (IDIYA, LOCKDOWN Project—to name a few). It was a joint effort. A story of the collaboration between diverse stakeholders such as parents, the VKF team, donors, volunteers, and students. It was a story of adaptation, resilience, fraternity, and co-creation. It was a lesson worth learning from. It's a personal journey of each – a journey meant to make the passengers fitter- better as a species that refused to become obsolete.

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APPENDIX

About Visamo Kids Foundation (VKF) (*Visamo kids' foundation*, 2020): The Parentage Home: Visamo Kids Foundation (VKF) was initiated with 18 unprivileged children in Ambawadi, Ahmedabad, as a part of the response program of CALORX Foundation under the leadership of Dr. Manjula Pujja Shroff. A shelter camp was set up for relief, rescue, and rehabilitation services to those affected by the earthquake, which shook Gujarat's state in 2001. In 2002, Visamo, meaning Shelter in Gujarati, was registered as Visamo Kids Foundation as a home providing foster care for underprivileged kids of the state. We are a shelter home working towards empowering lives through access to 'Quality Education' for underprivileged children from all over Gujarat in a secured environment of the '*parentage home*.'

Screening for Admission: Every year, in collaboration with grassroots NGOs, VKF conducts screening tests by reaching out to Gujarat's economically and socially disadvantaged communities. The grassroots NGOs are the key stakeholders who act as the bridge between the communities and Visamo, the institution. The screening is done by administering pictorial tests. Qualified psychologists assess the test papers. Those children (10) with the potential to excel academically are shortlisted.

Bridge In Program

Visamo Camp and Home Visit: These shortlisted children attend a ten-day- camp at VKF's shelter at Bopal, Ahmedabad, with the due consent of their parents, wherein a series of mental and physical tests are conducted. The residential staff – '*Gruhmatas*' (house mothers), observe the kids very closely and help them to get settled in the new milieu. Meanwhile, home visits are conducted to verify the background of all the shortlisted candidates. The home visits are done per the format provided by Visamo, by field teams of partnering institutions, as third-party evaluators.

Interview of parents: The camp culminates in an interview process wherein the parents are met by the managing trustee and a panel of selection board members to complete the selection process and admission to Visamo. Admission to VKF is conditional to the admission of the kids to schools.

Grooming and homeschooling: During the four months of their stay at VKF (before admission to the respective schools), the kids are groomed to be school and ready to readied to live in the institution. We partner with local pre-schools for the pre-schooling.

Admission in school: Admission to the Visamokids is made in some of the most prominent schools like DPS, Anand Niketan, Zydus, St. Kabir, Udgam, Zebra, Satyamev Jayate, AIS, etc. The admission gets over by December or early January. A bridge in the program is initiated wherein the kids are groomed for their stay at Visamo and prepared for admission to our partnering schools. Admission to the schools is made per the norms of the Right to Education (RTE) Act.

Academic Excellence: Visamo provides the kids with supplementary teaching classes after returning home from school. The teachers are hired part-time to help the kids cope with their studies at school, understand the concepts, and prepare them for exams/assessments. The teachers prepare Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) for each kid. Specialized care is taken for kids identified with special learning needs. Volunteers are one of the major contributors in helping us provide one-to-one attention to select kids.

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Co-Curricular activities at Visamo: To ensure their all-round development, VKF organizes life skill training, counseling, personality grooming, career guidance

/counseling sessions and interactions with eminent persons from diverse fields for the children.

Bridge out Programme: The kids start their journey at Visamo from Class I and complete twelve years of school education under diverse boards (CBSE, ICSE, GSEB). Just like the kids get groomed while they come into Visamo, there is a well-structured Bridge out Programme in place that supports the kids to get prepared to move out of Visamo, feeling confident, informed, and empowered about how to deal with their lives after stepping out of the seclusion of Visamo. Mentoring, Aptitude testing, career guidance and counseling, annual career fairs, interaction with field experts, exposure to diverse fields of study and career building, life skill coaching, etc., are the activities undertaken for the senior kids of Class VIII to XII.

Alumni of Visamo: To date, 44 kids have completed Class XII and graduated from Visamo. With the cadre growing in strength, the alumni are making a mark and making us proud.

Few of our alumni have completed their higher studies (Engineering, B.Com/Chartered Accountancy, Hotel Management) and are pursuing jobs. One alumnus, Ashish Badaniya, has shifted base to Bangalore and working with a reputed real estate group therein. One girl, Rinki, has pursued her dreams of becoming a fitness instructor and is popular among her students. Almost all the kids are pursuing part-time jobs to support their incidental costs and contribute to their families. Rohit worked at VKF as a part-time teacher alongside pursuing his Engineering studies. Mohsin and Raju are working as sports coaches at their alma mater, DPS, Bopal. Three of the students married and settled in their own spaces.

Marking a unique gesture of giving back, the alumni have pledged to support a kid at VKF and express their gratefulness to the institution. Jignesh Kalal extended his first stipend money and handed over the monies to his favorite person at Visamo, Ambien Shah, the Administrator. Rinki and Chandni have extended a part of their earnings towards child sponsorship. Vikas, Suresh, Sudhir, and other kids volunteer at Visamo and teach the younger kids in their leisure after college. Rakesh Chauhan helps us set up a thrift shop to raise funds through the garage sale of pre-loved clothes by cleaning, refurbishing, and packing the clothes, in his laundry shop.

The stories multiply. The bond continues. The ripple effect is evident. The camaraderie is felt. Giving back to the community rules the hearts of all.

Friends of Visamo: Visamo networks with multiple stakeholders to implement the program.

- *Parents:* The parents of the children at Visamo have bestowed their faith in the team and us and have supported the cause. They participate in routine events and have given consensus to the activities created for their kids at Visamo.
- *Vendors:* The timely delivery of quality services at reasonable costs helps us maintain service quality and achieve cost savings. The vendors associated with Visamo are a family to us, ready to help under all circumstances.
- *NGOs:* The organizations working at the grassroots, having strong community connections, are the link between Visamo, an institutional program, and the underprivileged/ disadvantaged groups/ communities.
- *Schools:* Our kids are studying across 11 schools in the city. Over the years, the bond between Visamo and the schools has been cemented with trust, commitment toward excellence, and gratitude.

- *Volunteers:* Visamo is blessed to have volunteers stepping in and becoming one with the *parivaar* (family). They bring joy and hope to the young lives nurtured in the parentage home. The silent and steady patrons who invest their most precious resource, *time*, at Visamo. We have local and international interns associating with kids this year to strengthen academic support and extracurricular activities.
- *Donors:* To sustain the current activities and initiate new ones, as per the needs of the time, bringing in new sources of sponsorships/ donations, Visamo has always received support and encouragement from the organization's donors. They are our ambassadors and spokespersons for the cause addressed.
- *Visamo Task Group (The VTG):* A group of experts from diverse fields forms a vibrant platform that meets every month and contributes towards bridging the gaps in the existing activities and strengthening the same. From fundraising to training staff to volunteering, each member of this group remains a source of hope and aspiration for the Visamoites.
- *Kalorex:* Visamo is integral to Kalorex, and team Kalorex is a source of energy for us. Kalorex ignites us, fuels us, steers the direction of our work, shapes us, holds us to account, holds our hand during challenging times, and celebrates the joys with us.

Access to Quality Education

Visamo partners with schools to ensure access to quality education. Kids study at the finest English Medium schools in the city, under CBSE, ICSE, IB, and Gujarat board (State).

We have hired teachers to ensure that the post-school support for the kids is in place. Part-time teachers help the students once they return from school.

Bridge in the program helps the initial grooming of the kids (at the age of 5 years) to undergo and cope with the rigors of formal schooling.

Bridge out program empowers the kids to feel confident to make choices after stepping out of Visamo (after finishing XII, kids step out of Visamo. The services under bridge out are:

- Mentoring
- Career counseling and guidance
- Aptitude testing
- Linking with donors to sponsor the costs of higher education
- One-to-one support for kids is provided through the help of volunteers.
- Kids detected with special abilities are supported to enhance their areas of interest.

Collaborations

Kalorex- parent organization Volunteers

Corporate partners

NGOs – A network of 11 NGOs helped us in rural networking and identification of eligible children to attend the screening tests

Schools- Education partners to VKF

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Visamo Alumni are the ambassadors of Visamo. They are the source of strength and lead by example for the kids at Visamo. The support routed to kids for higher studies after they pass out of Visamo after completing XII is not a grant but a loan that has to be re-paid to the Visamo revolving fund, which will sustain other kids' education.

We organize small-scale sales for income generation, such as the sale of paintings/ artwork of kids, the sale of pre-loved clothes, the sale of mats and other articles made out of the paintings of the kids, the sale of fertilizers made in Visamo by decomposing kitchen waste, and so on.

Child sponsorship and donor engagement programs are important for sustaining the activities at Visamo.

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CSR engagements are equally important for sustaining the activities.

Partnerships and collaborations with Kalorex, schools, the local community of volunteers, and business houses are key to the operations of the shelter home.

Exit Plan- Visamo is adopted by the business houses to support underprivileged kids across the state.

We do not have plans to upscale or expand. Visamo may be replicated. This is one of its programs. We are poised as a resource center; we will share our experiences and train people or institutions on residential care programs.

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