**Educating rural India amid COVID-19**

With every country on this planet facing a fatal disease termed as COVID-19, each one of them has been dealing with the pandemic in their own ways. COVID-19 has resulted in lock downs the world has never experienced before in this century. The winds of change have rapidly spread across all spheres of life and, of course, education is no exception. All of a sudden, since around March, India’s school age population of around 300 million is forced to sit home and wonder how to begin the current academic year.

The situation is far more challenging for academic institutions operating in the rural areas of the country. Each of the 130 Akal Academies operating in rural areas of Punjab, Haryana, UP, Rajasthan, and Himachal are working hard in this unforeseen situation to educate more than 70000 students. For more than past two decades, these Academies are working under the banner of Kalgidhar Trust at Baru Sahib in spreading value-based education to create global citizens from villages in rural India.

Realizing the consequences of academic loss to our students amid this pandemic, Akal Academies were the first institutions to start distance teaching learning for our students. Unlike urban, the rural areas have their own peculiar problems of Internet connectivity and its slow speed, to say the least. In addition to that, a majority of students in rural areas do not have computers or laptops. Availability of only one smartphone per family are some of the basic hurdles that came our way while providing online education to our students.

However, in this testing times, we are even more determined to continue following our path of dedicated service to the community and our students. While we are proponents of the technology usage, we have not let its limitations discourage us from delivering education to the door steps of our students. Starting March 23rd, 2020 when our new academic session 2020-21 was scheduled to start, the leadership, staff, and our dedicated teachers put together a distance learning program to make sure the sessions started on time. We took each hurdle as a challenge and worked hard towards resolving them with perseverance while also keeping in mind our end goal of educating our students through this pandemic.

We have come up with a solution that is three-fold. As a first step, we leveraged technology such as the Zoom app to deliver content live to our students. Second, the assignments and other soft content were electronically distributed via either email or Whatsapp. And third, office hours are being held with teachers to provide students for a much-needed interaction and support that they might crave in this unforeseen situation.

Implementing these steps turned out to be a turning point in the distance learning program where not only students and teachers, but even the parents started reinventing themselves. Our teachers are working really hard to make sure the material is accessible to students, gets distributed on time, and students are able to receive support as needed. As with learning, the system of assessment and evaluation of students’ work has also evolved.

Looking at our dedicated team of educators, more parents have shown interest in registering their children to attend nearby Akal Academies. As a token of their faith in our academic system, we have opened our distance learning program to all other students without any conditional expectation of expenses such as tuition.

We understand that being locked down inside their homes, students as well as teachers must be looking for answers for things going around during this pandemic. Having spirituality and meditation as integral parts of our educational curriculum, we are providing online classes with a recital of Nitnem by students as well as their family members. We are emphasizing that students understand the importance of Gurbani and Shabad Kirtan in providing solace to those who are constantly looking for answers and reiterate that DUKH DARU SUKH ROG BHYA JA SUKH TAAM NA HOI ( suffering is the medicine, and pleasure the disease, because where there is pleasure, there is no desire for God).

More determined than ever, we encourage everyone to come forward, help each other in healing from this moment of despair. Let’s make it our mission in spreading the knowledge, let education be our strength as well as our shield in our fight against COVID-19. We pray to Almighty to bestow HIS blessings of sound health and long life for SARBAT DA BHALLA. Let the winds of change strengthen our faith in educating rural India to reinforce our mission of Vidya Vichari Ta Parupkari.

R&D Cell

Team Innovation

Akal Academy Baru Sahib