

PROJECT SECOND INNINGS

In Dahod, new chapter for retired teachers — and students

AISHWARYA MOHANTY
VADODARA, JULY 14

UNTIL LAST year, Surya Bhabhor had the odds stacked against him. His parents were away, working as migrant workers, and he was with his grandmother in Gujarat's Dahod, struggling to cope at school, finding it "difficult to read and write English". Today, the 11-year-old breezes through the alphabet, and is happy to write his name in English and read out from a Class 5 textbook at the primary school in Vadela village.

Until last year, all that 59-year-old retired teacher Lakshman Chauhan wanted to do was spend time at his "small farm" near his home in Vadela. Today, he is back in front of the blackboard at the school, happy to be conducting remedial sessions for students in need.

What has brought Bhabhor and Chauhan together is Project Second Innings, launched by the Dahod administration under the NITI Aayog's Transformation of Aspirational Districts programme. Dahod is among 117 districts identified by NITI Aayog, with edu-

cation as one of the core areas of focus.

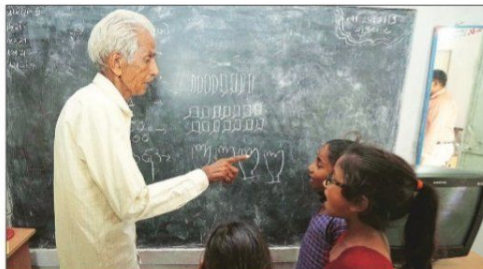
The project was launched in 2018 to help improve learning outcomes in primary and upper primary classes, specifically in reading, writing and Maths. And Chauhan is among 517 retired teachers who have voluntarily signed up, so far.

"I still believe in the traditional system — read, write, practise and learn. If they can learn the language well, they can read and understand other subjects, too. I continuously conduct dictations and sessions where students read out from their textbooks," says Chauhan.

Then, there's 78-year-old Natha Barjod, the "Master ji" at the primary school in Kalia Valunda village. "I retired as a school

principal in 1999, and was approached by the district last year to volunteer as a tutor in my village. I get about Rs 20,000 in pension, and both my sons are working, so I don't have anything else to worry about. I help the students here with Gujarati and Maths," he says.

The results are showing. At last year's Gunotsav, an annual evaluation in government primary schools, 58,639 students from classes 6 to 8 in Dahod were graded below 5



Retired teacher Natha Barjod at the primary school in Kalia Valunda village, Dahod. Bhupendra Rama

on a scale of 1-10 in reading, 66,133 in writing and 67,666 in Maths. Of these students, 27,598 improved their grades this year to above 6 in reading, 28,664 in writing and 32,827 in Maths.

Dahod has also climbed one rung from the bottom among 33 districts in the

Secondary School Certificate (SSC) results — from last in pass percentage (37.35%) in 2018 to one step higher (49.18%) this year.

According to District Collector, Vijay Kharadi, 285 more retired teachers are being drafted, with a target of 1,000 by the year-end. "We are also looking at retired govern-

ment officials based in their villages who can devote time for the project," he says.

Nodal Education Officer (Aspirational District), Janak Patel, says they pick volunteers from an updated database. "As soon as teachers retire, we approach them to teach in their own villages. If they agree, we organise classes for an hour before or after normal school hours," says Patel.

District Development Officer, R K Patel, says migration is "one of the key" factors that has led to lower learning outcomes in Dahod, a tribal district. Labour records show that over 30,000 people migrate every year on an average in search of work, mostly from February to July. Of them, about 15,000 return during the monsoon but leave again by August-end.

"We realised that once students go home, they don't get help because their parents are mostly out for work. With the experience and expertise of retired teachers, they get extra attention in school itself," he says.

Vinod Rao, Secretary, Education Department, Gujarat, says the "major challenge" in the district is attendance. "Against the state performance of 57% students with attendance above 80%, Dahod has only 17%. All these initiatives are directed towards reviving attendance," he says.



**TRACKING
CHANGE >>>**
GUJARAT/EDUCATION