

MAKING SCHOOLING EASIER

In Rajasthan, integrated books make school bags lighter, students happier

Baste ka Bojh Kam project, being piloted in one govt school of each district, has reduced weights to a third

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"BILKUL KUM ho gaya hai (yes, the weight has reduced drastically)," says Naina, a Class 3 student at the Government Senior Secondary School Vatika of Jaipur as she talks about her school bag.

"I walk to school, which is about 25 minutes from home. Earlier, I carried four books, but now I carry just one," she says. She is not the only one enjoying the relief. Her classmate Neeraj says, "Earlier we used to carry Hindi, English, Mathematics and Environment textbooks, now we carry just one. Dev, who is in Class 2, says his home is about 20 minutes walk away and his three books have now been replaced by just one.

The weight of Dev's textbooks has reduced from 0.95 kg to 0.30 kg. For Naina and Neeraj, it has decreased from 1.35 kg to 0.5 kg. The changes are across the board (see box)

Naina, Neeraj, Dev and 60 other students between Classes 1 and 3 at this government school on the outskirts of Jaipur are part of a state-wide pilot project in Rajasthan — one school in each of the state's 33 districts — where the government has implemented Baste Ka Bojh Kam (BKBK) project to make the school bags weigh less. "The psychological pressure has reduced since they have to face just one book now, and the new books are more colourful and interactive too," says Dr Bhawna Nehla, the Principal.

It was from this school that Rajasthan's Minister of State for Primary and Secondary Education (Independent Charge), Govind Singh Dotasra, had launched the project in September. While it was initially announced for Classes 1 to 5, the pilot project was eventually restricted to Classes 1 to 3.

"It is a pilot project, the outcomes can be gauged from studying Classes 1 to 3 as well," says Pradeep Kumar Borar, Commissioner, Rajasthan School Shiksha Parishad.

Srivashist Sekar, Program Manager, Piramal Foundation for Education Leadership, says that "All books reached the target schools by the first week of November. Next, we will scale up the project to include Classes 4 and 5".

The books these children hold now were rebid trimester-wise, instead of being subject-wise. For example, a Class 1 student will carry 1 book in a trimester, and this book has all the topics to be covered from Hindi, English, Maths for that trimester, instead of 3 books — one each per subject. Thus, rather than taking 3-4 books of the individual subject, the students are taking just one book to school.

The project comes in the backdrop of the



Students enjoying their new interactive books at a govt school in Jaipur. Express

EXPLAINED

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How lighter school bags help

WHEN RAJASTHAN did a study, 73% of the students asked, said they were bothered by the weight of their school bags. About 42%, in fact, saw the weight saw it as a hindrance to schoolgoing. About 40% of the parents agreed. When integrated books — one book for multiple subjects — were introduced, teachers overwhelmingly approved of them.

WHY INTEGRATED BOOKS WERE THE BEST OPTION TO LIGHTEN SCHOOL BAGS

SOLUTION AVAILABLE	LIKELY COST	SCALABILITY	TIME REQUIRED
Locker facility	High	Low	appx 10 years
Tablets	Very high	Low	appx 5 years
No books at all	Low	High	Training teachers
Reduce Curriculum	Quality cost	N/A	Govt-level decision
Teach 1-2 subjects/day	Avg cost training teachers	High	1-2 years to train all
INTEGRATED BOOKS	ZERO	VERY HIGH	NA

MUCH LIGHTER NOW

Class 1	0.90 kg to 0.40 kg
Class 2	0.95 kg to 0.30 kg
Class 3	1.35 kg to 0.50 kg
Class 4	1.45 kg to 0.50 kg
Class 5	1.25 kg to 0.50 kg.

Ministry of Human Resource Development asking all states and Union Territories last year to fix the weight of school bags. Following the directions, the Rajasthan government partnered with Piramal Foundation and started the BKBK project to implement a pilot project and study the scalability of the concept.

Following several meetings with experts, the available solutions (see box) were studied and the government zeroed in on term-wise rebidding of textbooks.

The idea of such books was first thought of by Commissioner Borar. In 2003-04, as director of Lok Jumbish Parishad, a primary education project, he had prepared drafts of such textbooks. The books also drew inspiration from comics and converted chapters with conversations into comic strips. The idea, however, was rejected. "They found small mistakes and magnified them," says Borar. Back then, he had

called those books "Aao Khelein (Let's play)". Fifteen years on, the new textbooks are also called "Aao Khelein".

The new books were drafted and went through a three-stage review process, starting from Deputy Director to Deputy Commissioner and then the Commissioner.

While it was ensured that the existing syllabus remains untouched, the experts proposed and incorporated the concept of "divider pages" — these are pages between individual subjects within a book. During their field visits, experts had observed that students were playing certain games on their own. Hence, subject-specific and age-appropriate games were designed to enhance and create "joyful" learning.

Class 2 textbook, for example, has a simple "join the dots and colour" for a camel and a cartoon as well as "identify objects and match them with their names" exercise, among others.

THE BIG STORY

As part of the study, feedback was sought from as many as 531 students, 172 parents, 92 teachers, 18 principals and 12 officials. A total of 72.9% students said that they were bothered about heavy bags, and a good 42 per cent said that heavy bag acts as a hindrance for them from going to school. Among parents, too, 40.70 per cent felt that the heavy weight of bags was one of the reasons for their child's unwillingness to go to school. However, after the distribution of the new book, 69 per cent students said that they feel "lighter," both physically and mentally.

Every single teacher who was interviewed said that the initiative was able to bring a "huge difference" in students, with the weight of the new books being just one of the reasons. As many as 91.3% teachers also said that the project should be implemented in the entire state.

"We are the first state ... I appeal to other states and private schools to adopt this initiative," Education Minister Dotasra said.