



Stories of Change



February 2022

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YouthInvest Foundation gratefully acknowledges the contribution of all our friends and donors who believed in us and supported in setting up and running Sambhavana Learning Centres. Their generous and unwavering support have made it possible for us to continue despite Covid 19 and the prolonged lockdown.

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February 2022

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Introduction



Each year, at least 1.5 million girls under 18 get married in India. That makes India home to the highest number of child brides in the world. For these child brides, early marriage ends their education and chances of gainful employment and brings in motherhood when they are still children themselves, putting them at significant health risks and severely limiting their foundational life choices. Ensuring secondary education for these girls is one of the best ways to delay marriage for these girls and prevent the loss of a lifetime of opportunities. In the last two years, Covid 19 has impacted the already dire situation, and with increased poverty and decreased access to education with the shutting down of schools, the incidence of child marriage has increased substantially, particularly in the rural areas.

KEEPING GIRLS IN SCHOOL IS ONE OF THE BEST WAYS OF DELAYING MARRIAGE. ON AN AVERAGE, THE LIKELIHOOD OF A GIRL MARRYING AS A CHILD IS SIX PERCENTAGE POINTS LESS FOR EVERY ADDITIONAL YEAR SHE STAYS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION.

YouthInvest Foundation (YouthInvest) has set up Sambhavana Learning Centre (SLC), a learning platform for high school dropout adolescent girls between 15 and 19 years to give them a “second chance” to complete secondary education and enhance their life choices. SLCs use an integrated life skills curriculum and offer digital skills training. They are co-located in government spaces, such as local schools, and employ local women graduates as teachers. Each SLC can accommodate 25-30 girls.

Starting with 2 SLCs in 2017, YouthInvest currently runs 12 SLCs in rural areas of Jharkhand and West Bengal in eastern India and has enabled 750 out-of-school adolescent girls from extremely poor families to continue secondary studies and choose a better future.

Stories of Change chronicles the stories of these girls who had taken the pledge to change their lives through continuing education and have defied extraordinary odds – juggling household chores and backbreaking labour to earn their livelihoods – to enrol in SLCs and attend classes. It is also about our amazing teachers who not only work in classrooms but also in the community to motivate and encourage girls and their parents constantly and have not been deterred by Covid 19 and lockdowns by adapting to digital teaching using mobile phones and in open spaces. And finally, it is also about the parents who despite many odds, decided to send back their teenage daughters to SLCs so that they get a second chance in transforming their lives.

Empowering and nurturing capable, confident girls

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At YouthInvest, we believe along with formal academic training, a strong emphasis on enabling girls to develop a wider awareness of themselves and the external context in which they live is vital for nurturing capable, confident girls.

Accordingly, SLCs follow an intergrated curriculum consiting of academic, life skills, digital literacy and co-curricular acvities for a holistic learning experience. This provides the girls with an opportunity to develop an awareness of their social situation, and gain the necessary skills, confidence and self-esteem for understanding multiple challenges life can pose and ways to address these for defining their own paths.

SLC CURRICULUM



Academic curriculum

- **Foundation course** (Foundatinal language and numeracy skills)
- **Bridge course** (Elementary level language and subject competency)
- **Secondary course** following the National/ State Open School Secondary Board



Life skills and Digital Literacy

- Social and emotional skills
- Health & nutrition awareness
- Understanding of gender and rights
- Digital literacy and basic IT skills



Co-curricular activities

- Music, theatre
- Yoga and sports
- Art & crafts

Arti

03

Arti was only 5 years when she lost her father. After that, they struggled to sustain their family of 7 members. Their small plot of land in Karge village of Mandar block in Jharkhand was not sufficient to make a living and Arti along with her brothers had to work as farm labourers.

Arti worked from five till nine every morning before school. However, after Grade 8, lack of a high school nearby left her in no situation to continue her studies. But she did not lose hope and dreamt of completing school one day.

Arti got to know about Sambhavana Learning Centre while attending a “Mahila Samiti” (women’s group) meeting in her village. When she met with the SLC teacher to know more, it felt like a school coming to her doorstep.



Arti enrolled in SLC in 2019 and attended classes regularly. She found studying difficult initially. However the learner-centric curriculum in SLC, and the support and encouragement of the SLC teacher enabled Arti to regain her confidence and cope with the learning gap of the past 3 years. She managed to balance her work and studies despite the Covid lockdown and passed Secondary Board Exam in 2021.

Arti vowed to continue higher studies and is currently enrolled in Mandar College. She continues to work as a farm labourer to bear her college fees and travel costs. Arti wishes to continue her studies in the future and says even if her brothers do not support her, she will not give up. She wants to be financially self-reliant and teach other girls.

“SLC HAS GIVEN ME THE WINGS TO FLY. WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT I COULD COMPLETE SECONDARY SCHOOL AND WOULD GO TO COLLEGE? SLC HAS TRULY SHOWN ME THE POSSIBILITIES. I FEEL LIKE I CAN DO ANYTHING.”

ARTI, 18 YEARS

04

Sutanara



Sutanara, a 17-year-old girl from Hatma, a tribal village in Mandar block of Jharkhand never thought that she could get a chance to go back to study and fulfil her dreams. Sambhavna Learning Centre gave her the chance to dream again.

Sutanara's life has been full of hardship as she lost both her parents at a young age. As the eldest child, she had to look after her 4 siblings and had to support them financially.

She had only a dream of continuing her education, but the situations were not in her favour. After completing middle school, she had to drop out as the high school was far from her village and she did not have the resources to travel daily. But when an SLC started in Hatma, Sutanara immediately enrolled when she got to know that there was no monthly fee to study in SLCs.

To support herself and her siblings, Sutanara continued to work as an agricultural labourer and vegetable seller. For two years, Sutanara used to toil from dawn to dusk to manage all her household chores and work so that she could attend classes regularly. Sutanara was passionate to continue her studies and despite many odds that she had to face, she chose to stay strong and decided not to leave SLC.

Sutanara passed Secondary Board Examination in 2021 and has enrolled in Mandar College to pursue her studies. She plans to complete graduate studies and get a good job. She also encourages her siblings to complete their studies and has recently enrolled her younger sister in SLC.

“GIRLS MUST GET EDUCATED. HOW WILL THEY GAIN UNDERSTANDING ABOUT BASIC ISSUES OTHERWISE? HOW WILL THEY UNDERSTAND WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THEIR SURROUNDINGS, AND HOW WILL THEY TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR LIVES?”

SUTANARA, 17 YEARS

Shahina

05

Sahina Khatun, a 17-year-old girl was no different than other girls residing in Tigoi Ambatoli village of Mandar block, Jharkhand. Like others, she also completed 8th grade from the middle school in her village. But after that, there was no opportunity for her to continue her education because there was no high school within 6 km.

When an SLC opened in her village middle school in 2017, Sahina was overjoyed. After the SLC teacher talked and motivated her parents, Sahina enrolled in the SLC. She wanted to become a teacher after completing her education. She was regular in classes and actively participated in all the activities. At SLC, she learnt how to use a computer and the internet. Sahina passed Secondary Board with first division in 2019.



Although she wanted to study further, Sahina could not continue higher education because of health issues. Presently, she helps her family in cultivation and takes up embroidery work as per local demands. She wishes to see herself financially independent in the future and she is working to achieve that dream.

Sahina fondly talks about her days in SLC and the friends that she made during the time. She feels SLC not only helped her to fulfil her dreams of becoming a matriculate but also broadened her horizons, made her more articulate and understand herself better. Sahina passionately believes that everyone should complete school and motivates her siblings and other girls in her village in continuing their education.

“SLC WAS A BRIDGE FOR ME THAT HELPED ME TO CROSS THE GAP BETWEEN MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL. NOT ONLY DID IT ENABLE ME TO COMPLETE SECONDARY STUDIES, BUT ALSO HELPED ME TO BECOME MORE CONFIDENT AND SELF-RELIANT. I WISH THAT GIRLS IN MY VILLAGE COMPLETE THEIR BASIC EDUCATION SO THEY CAN HAVE THEIR OWN SPACE TO SHARE OPINIONS.”

SAHINA, 23 YEARS

06 Binita



Binita Munda, a 20-year-old tribal girl residing in Chanho block in Jharkhand dropped out of school because of the financial constraints her family was facing. She had to join the workforce at a young age as an agricultural labourer. However, she wanted to study if she got a chance.

After three long years, Binita got to know about Sambhavana Learning Centre that opened near her village. She felt that she should give herself a chance. The fact that studying in SLC involved no monthly fees, and only required payment of the government board registration and exam fees, also helped her to make this decision.

Binita passed her secondary board exams in 2019. Since her family was very poor, the SLC teachers counselled her to continue with her studies and at the same time also join a vocational skills training programme so that she can become financially independent.

Presently, Binita is attending Mandar college to pursue her dream of becoming a graduate. Binita walks more than 6 km every day to attend college as she cannot bear the transport costs. Due to her mother's poor health, she could not join the vocational programme as planned. However, she is determined to pursue her college education and plans to join a vocational skills training programme soon.

"BINITA IS AN INSPIRATION FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY AND A ROLE MODEL FOR ALL TRIBAL GIRLS IN SIMILAR SITUATIONS. SHE HAS DEMONSTRATED THAT NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE IF ONE HAS THE WILL, DETERMINATION, AND A LITTLE SUPPORT."

SHILPI SINGH, SR. TEACHER, SLC ROL

Shahnaz

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Shahnaz and Shahin, the two sisters from Tigoi Ambatoli village in Mandar block of Jharkhand have joined Sambhavana Learning Centre in 2017. They both dropped out of the education system after Grade 8 due to lack of a high school close to their village. Coming from a conservative community and mindset, it was not easy for Shahnaz and her sister to think about continuing school. But both chose to continue studies when an SLC opened at their doorstep.

Shahnaz mentioned that before joining SLC there was a gap of 3 years which made her almost forget most of what she studied before she left school. But gradually following the SLC curriculum that allowed learners to learn at their own pace and with the support of the SLC teacher, Shahnaz was able to cope with the learning gap. Shahin has supported her sister in many ways. After class, they sat together and worked on problems.



Presently, Shahnaz attends Mandar college. She walks 8 km daily to reach college as she cannot afford transportation expenses. Shahnaz sees herself continuing her education and getting a job in the future.

Shahnaz's family supports her to continue her education and motivates her to achieve her dream. She also mentioned that her family is proud of her achievements and is very supportive of her decision to work in the future.

“IT IS NOT EASY TO WALK THIS LONG DISTANCE BUT I DON'T HAVE ANY OPTION. IF I WANT TO CONTINUE MY STUDIES, I HAVE TO GO ON.”

SHAHNAZ, 22 YEARS

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Shamma



Shamma Parveen, a 15-year-old girl from Tigoi Ambatoli village in Mandar block of Jharkhand, got a second chance to fulfil her dreams of completing secondary education when she enrolled in the local Sambhavana Learning centre in 2021.

Due to the Covid lockdown, her father who used to work as a tailor lost his livelihood and the family fell into financial hardship. Her school also closed, and Shamma was forced to drop out. Her family decided that Shamma need not continue her studies and wanted to marry her off.

However, Shamma did not lose hope and after two years, she convinced her parents to allow her to join the SLC in her village. In October 2021, when Shamma joined, she had to go to teacher's house where classes were being held as the village middle school where SLC was located was closed. Shamma wants to complete secondary studies and says her thirst for knowledge has motivated her to come back to school.

What Shamma likes best at SLC was the interactions with the teacher. Unlike her previous school experience, the teacher at SLC "always listens and explains everything without ever losing patience". Shamma, who sings as a hobby, likes the extra-curricular and life skills activities that have started in SLC after it reopened in February 2022. She is now looking forward to the computer training classes so that she can "type and make presentations". Shamma does not want to marry till she completes her secondary education. Ideally, she would like to study further like other girls in her village who joined college after passing from SLC. She also wants to get a job or learn a trade "so that I can support my family".

"I WOULD LIKE TO BECOME A TEACHER LIKE MA'AM HERE, WHO HAS MOTIVATED AND BROUGHT SO MANY GIRLS BACK TO SCHOOL. SHE EVEN CONTINUED TO TEACH AT HER HOME WHEN SLC HAD TO CLOSE DURING COVID. I FEEL SO COMFORTABLE HERE AND CAN ASK ANYTHING WITHOUT ANY FEAR. I ALSO WANT TO HELP OTHER GIRLS SIMILARLY."

SHAMMA, 15 YEARS

Shakuntala: working to change parental attitude towards girls' education

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Shakuntala joined YouthInvest as a teacher when Sambhavana Learning Centre was set up in her village Tigoi Ambatoli in 2017. She is a graduate with an advanced degree in education.

Shakuntala always wanted to teach but did not get an opportunity as she moved to Tigoi Ambatoli after marriage where there were very limited prospects. Over the last four years, Shakuntala has been working tirelessly in her village to convince and encourage parents to send their adolescent daughters to SLC. She enlisted the support of religious leaders in her village to help her motivate the families and the girls.

When SLC had to be closed due to Covid 19, Shakuntala was undeterred and continued to teach using digital methods in small groups and reached out to her students on a one-on-one basis too. When she could, she started classes at her home so that the girls are motivated in coming to learn and prepare for the board exam.

"These girls are grown up and can think for themselves. There is so much pressure on them to work, to marry, it is hard to keep them focused. It is extremely important to keep them constantly engaged in the learning process. If the habit of regular learning is broken, it is very difficult to motivate them again."

"I feel very strongly about educating children. After marriage, when I moved to Ambatoli, I saw that girls here are getting a raw deal because there is no high school close to the village. Most of the girls would drop out of the education system after completing Grade 8 from the village Middle School or the Madrasa that are close to their homes. I attended the initial meetings in Tigoi Ambatoli Middle School at the time YouthInvest was planning to open Sambhavana Learning Centre for drop-out girls there. When they advertised for teachers, I immediately applied. The day I got selected was one of the happiest as I always wanted to teach and work to promote girls' education."

"Starting the program in the community was not easy as Tigoi Ambatoli has a large Muslim population. Education generally is not valued here and many of the parents themselves had never been to school themselves. They were very protective about their daughters, and many believed girls need not pursue higher studies. Parents did not want to send their daughters to high school because of the distance and issues of security. I understood that to change this mindset, there is no alternative but to constantly engage with the parents. I conducted a village survey and identified more than 40 adolescent girls who have dropped out and waiting to be married off. Initially, when I met the parents during the survey, most of them would not even talk to me. But I persisted and constantly visited them to persuade them to send their daughters to my SLC. I had to ask them to trust me with their daughters. Since I am from the same village, gradually I built trust and got my first batch enrolled in SLC. Once the first batch of girls passed secondary board exam, there was no looking back."



“I received a lot of support from local religious leaders who also counsel parents to send their daughters to SLC for a holistic education experience. Parents’ attitudes have changed a lot during these last four years. During Covid, when I was constantly in touch with the girls either through phone or by making home visits, engagement with parents increased and they started taking interest in their daughters’ academic performance. After completing two batches, I had no difficulty in enrolling the third batch of girls in my SLC. This is the power of education, it can truly transform.”

“WE STILL HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO. ALTHOUGH PARENTAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS GIRLS’ EDUCATION IS CHANGING IN TIGOI AMBATOLI, FREEDOM FOR GIRLS TO MOVE FREELY IS STILL VERY LIMITED. THAT IS THE NEXT THING WE MUST FOCUS IN SLC. I FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT IF WE PERSIST, WE SHALL GET THERE TOO.”

SHAKUNTALA, TEACHER, SLC TIGOI AMBATOLI



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Shabir Ansari: a parent testimonial



My name is Shabir Ansari, and I am 65 years old. I live in Tigoi Ambatoli village. I wanted to share my experience as a parent of two daughters who enrolled in Sambhavana Learning Centre in 2017. Both studied there for two years and successfully passed their Secondary Board Exam with first division. They both had dropped out after Grade 8 and were out of school for three years before joining SLC.

The SLC teacher is extraordinary. She constantly motivated our family and the girls so that they attend the centre regularly. Initially I was not very convinced, but her persistence won me over. SLC has changed my daughters, I feel it has not only provided academic education, but they are smarter and more confident.

They also attended computer classes which is very important in today's world. One of my daughters is now going to college, a first in our family.

After seeing my daughters' growth, I want to support them in pursuing their dreams, be it higher education or work. I feel that marriage can wait till they are ready. I feel introducing vocational skills training in the SLCs will help to make the girls financially independent too.

"I THINK SLC IS A VERY GOOD INITIATIVE FOR THE GIRLS OF THIS VILLAGE WHERE MANY GIRLS CANNOT ATTEND HIGH SCHOOL THAT IS LOCATED MORE THAN 6 KM AWAY FROM THIS VILLAGE. APART FROM SECURITY ISSUES, MAJORITY OF THE FAMILIES CANNOT AFFORD THE TRAVEL EXPENSES TO ATTEND HIGH SCHOOL. SLC HAS TRULY MADE A HUGE DIFFERENCE IN CHANGING SOCIAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS GIRLS' EDUCATION AND HAS DEMONSTRATED THE VALUE OF EDUCATION IN SHAPING LIVES."

SHABIR ANSARI, PARENT



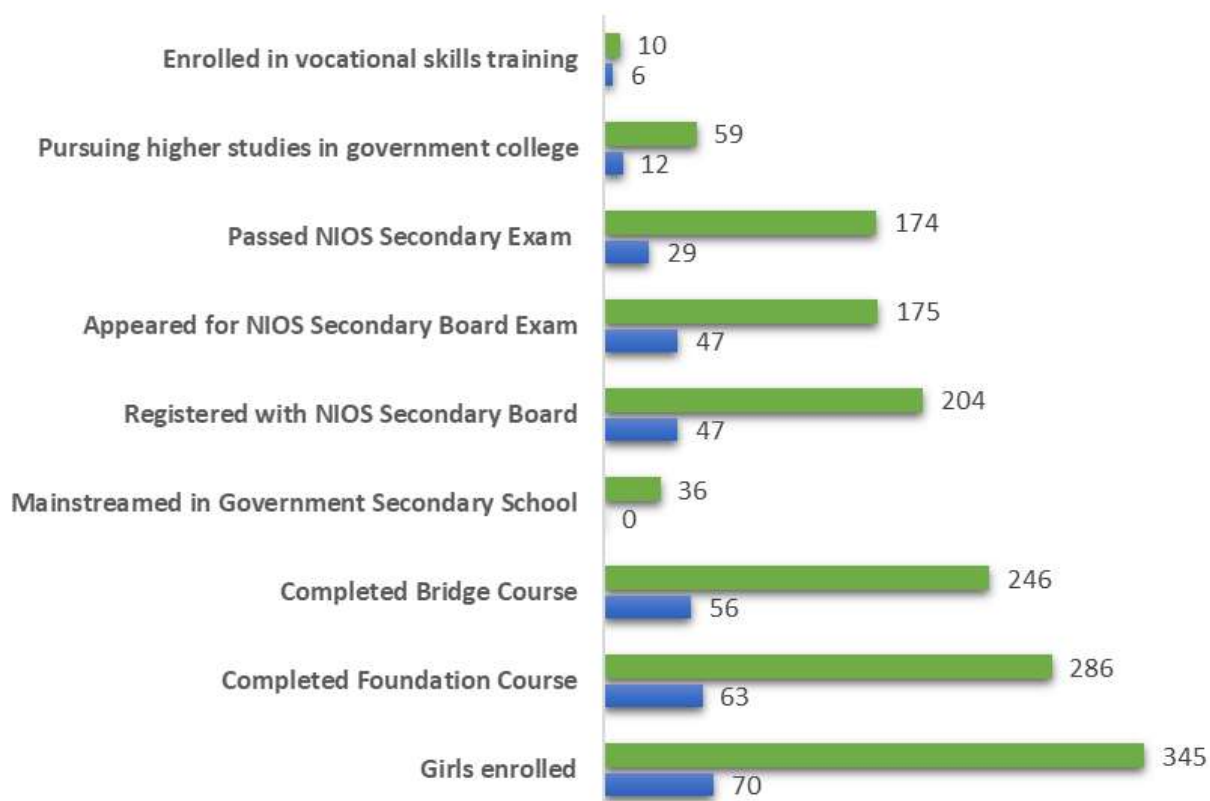
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Number of SLCs

750

*Adolescent girls reached***Impact**

■ 2019-21 ■ 2017-2019



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Express Trade Tower 2, 7th Floor, Alt F,
Sector 132, Noida 201301

www.youthinvestfoundation.org

YouthInvest Foundation is an Indian not-for-profit organization working to ensure rights to health, education and livelihoods for adolescents and youth (10-29 years). YouthInvest envisions healthy, educated, emotionally well-adjusted and skilled adolescents and youth – especially from marginalized and disadvantaged populations – entering adulthood.