Transforming Gurukula with Technology and Promoting the Preservation of Local Breeds of Cows Through the Training Program
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Background:

As per our original proposal, our plan was to build greenhouses and conduct environment-related workshops in the Dolpo region (in Nepal). However, the sudden outbreak of the second wave of COVID-19 compelled us to change our project entirely. We tried hard to find a place where we could do the project in-person, while keeping the safety of everyone as our first priority. As a result, we connected with "Yogi Naraharinath Ashram and Samskrit Gurukulam" in Chitwan. A "Gurukulam " is a Sanskrit term for school and is a part of the ancient education system in Nepal. The gurukula system has significantly contributed to preserving ancient traditions and knowledge by passing it to the new generation of students. However, the students at the Gurukula had little knowledge of daily life technology like computers. Therefore, we decided to establish a computer lab and teach them basic computer skills. Similarly, we planned to conduct a week-long training program, especially for youth, to manufacture *gauarka* (a product from cow urine), incense, insecticide, toothpaste, and soap out of cow dung. These products are effective only if we use the urine and dung of native cows. Our goal was to expose the economical and ecological benefit of native breeds of cows and hence promote their preservation.

Project Site:

We chose *Yogi Naraharinath Ashram and Samskrit Gurukulam* as our project sites. It is a prominent part of Deveghat Dham, a site of spiritual significance, and is located in the Chitwan district of Nepal. The Gurukulam is home to around 30 students. Moreover, the ashram is protecting more than 150 local cows. Currently, Yogi Pitambar is the executive head of the ashram and gurukula.

Project Goals:

The goal of the training program was to provide local people with the necessary knowledge and skills to manufacture products like soap, toothpaste, *Gauarka,* incense, and pesticide using the urine and dung of local breeds of cows. Our hope was that this would have a significant impact on creating an eco-friendly lifestyle. Similarly, the goal of setting up a computer lab was to make the students in Gurukul familiar with computers and prepare them with relevant skills such as MS-word, MS Excel, and MS PowerPoint to present their unique learnings of Sanskrit and moral education.

Our Work:

a) Computer lab
After communicating with the gurukula administration, we started to teach in the gurukula. To our surprise, we found that students were learning subjects that are too scripture-centric and had no formal knowledge of science and computer studies. There is no doubt that learning the ancient scriptures plays a significant role in preserving and promoting our precious culture and ancient knowledge, but in today's world students also need basic knowledge of computers and science. With this intention, we decided to contribute to the gurukulam and the children. We wanted to bring the ancient traditions alongside technology. By doing this, the children would not feel uncomfortable dealing with the outside world.

To teach computer skills, the first thing we needed was to buy computers. Considering the space and the number of students, we bought two computers. We set aside about four hours every day to teach them computer skills and the English language to help them become acquainted with computer-related terminologies.

The eagerness of the children to learn touched us. Some years back we were also like these children, trying to figure out how to dial a mobile phone number, and now we are in a place where we have the resources to help them explore the technological world, and make use of it in a constructive way. We made

sure that children became familiar with typing conventions. After that, we taught them Word, Powerpoint, and Paint. Most importantly, we encouraged them to explore different features of these programs and help each other to learn more. Within one week, we were able to train all of the pupils to be able to write the text from their book on the computer. Some of them were able to write a manuscript to make it ready to print. Bishal, one of the students, typed a manuscript (in Sanskrit) in just 3 days to print it as a book. In a similar manner, they were able to design presentations with the contents of Gurukula for the public to know more about the Gurukul. They did it more creatively with time. We encouraged them to help each other, which in fact played a vital role in making everyone able to learn computer skills. We supported their tech interests by teaching them the ideas of cameras and techniques for taking pictures. Throughout our month long stay in the Ashram, they often asked us questions out of their curiosity. Coming to the third week, we were glad to see the fruitful outcome of our work and the dedication of the students. For most of the pupils, it was their first interaction with the computer. From being introduced to the computer for the first time to running different MS products creatively in only a month, we could not have been more proud of our students. We handed two computers and their accessories to the Gurukula.

b) Training Part

While we were setting up the computer lab and teaching students, Yogi Pitambar was arranging the necessary materials required for the training. We bought raw materials like Multani mitti (a type of mud), sikakai (a local organic ingredient for soap), distillation equipment, and medicinal plants. The students also showed their enthusiasm by helping us clean the training hall and repair the furniture, electricity, sound system, and projector. Once the logistics part of the training was
set, we invited two trainers from Kathmandu who were certified in this field. Along with these trainers, Yogi Pitambar also had significant knowledge about the manufacturing process of these products which helped greatly in teaching the audience.

Since covid-19 was spreading rapidly in different parts of the country, the health and safety of everyone was our first priority. Therefore, we only invited the local community and members of local organizations like the *Leo club of Chitwan* and the *World Hindu Youth Club*. Similarly, some people from the *Yogi Naraharinath Natural Therapy Hospital* also participated in the training program.

On the first day, we did an introductory session about the training. Yogi Pitambar went into lots of detail about all the aspects of native cows and why their urine and dung are so important in daily life. Then we distributed a small booklet that contained all the vital information about the medicinal and spiritual significance of native cows. The next couple of days were spent training the participants about the process of manufacturing gauarka from cow urine. Interestingly, only the urine of local native cows is applicable, and on top of this, the cow must be grazing in the natural pasture land. Throughout the training, we guided the trainees through every detail of the process ensuring that they understood it well. Everybody enjoyed the process and our efforts were well appreciated by respected people of the community. Because many people are not aware of the economical and spiritual significance of the cow, they show resistance in rearing cows in their homes. Instead of cows, they prefer buffaloes or goats. But after this training, they acknowledged the benefits of rearing cows. Overall, the training went well.

Reflection and Conclusion:

Our work was appreciated by the local community which inspired us. The mayor of the local municipality, Mr. Prakash Sapkota congratulated us for our work. In our one and half month time at the ashram, we had the opportunity to observe the educational and cultural aspects of the place. Most of the students in the gurukula come from rural areas and communities. Here they do not have to pay for anything. They often come from areas where infrastructures like roads are not available. The pupils, therefore, do not have much familiarity with the use of modern technological equipment like computers and cameras. This could bring challenges to them when they graduate from the Gurukul and try to settle in the "modern" society. At the same time, gurukula education offers things that modern education is not able to address properly. The Gurukula system is designed in such a way that as children spend time with the Guru they realize the responsibility and compassion within them. Students spend most of their time with nature. This makes them more conscious of the environment and aesthetics of life. Art, music, singing, dancing, gardening, farming,

sports, meditation, performing rituals, and so on are an integral part of their education. Most of these components are not present in modern schools. This is why we found that students at gurukula are comparatively more spiritual, noble in character, disciplined, confident, kind, compassionate, mentally stable, and pragmatic. Therefore, we felt that it would be beneficial if we could find a way to put the best of both worlds together i.e., technical skills of modern education and spiritual evolution of gurukula education.

Similarly, in the last few years because of the unplanned modernization in the country, people started to adopt more stable forms of income. One of the consequences of this was the displacement of local cows. Most left their cows on the streets to survive on their own. People began to rear buffaloes because they give more milk than local cows. There is nothing wrong with rearing buffaloes, but interestingly, we found that cows offer more economic benefits than buffaloes. However, this fact was unknown to most people. When we explained this in our training program people were amazed. We believe that our project greatly impacted the spread of this truth.

Although our plan to work in the Dolpo region was shattered by the most recent wave of Covid-19, it provided us an opportunity to explore issues in other parts of the country. We were able to overcome various situations that occurred along the way, and were able to complete our work in the limited time of one and a half months. We feel satisfied with our efforts and will continue to get updates from Yogi Pitambar about the impact of our project.

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