

Catalyst

CHANGE TAKES SHAPE THROUGH PERSERVERANCE

MAY 2025



Greetings,

As India moves forward with the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, there is a growing recognition that development must go beyond economic strength. A truly progressive nation invests in the overall well-being of its people, physically, emotionally, and socially.

India's ambitions for the decades ahead, such as economic leadership, social equity, and innovation, will rest on our ability to address the societal and holistic well-being of its people. Together, these priorities shape the fabric of a nation.

Our teams in mental health, menstrual health, and education have been quietly but persistently engaging with these realities over the last decade. Driving impact by supporting tailored and inclusive learning approaches in classrooms, quipping frontline workers with the tools and knowledge to build healthier communities and fostering the emotional resilience of our nation's security personnel through mental health interventions. We are also addressing the urgent mental health needs of our youth through prevention-focused initiatives.

We have been witnessing a rising trend of behaviour-seeking among young people and caregivers alike in the last few years, a hopeful sign that awareness is growing and taboos are being questioned. By aligning policy, education, healthcare, and civil society, we have been able to normalise support-seeking behaviour.

Ultimately, progress is most meaningful when it leaves no voice unheard, no person unsupported. That is the true spirit and responsibility driving our collective journey towards Viksit Bharat 2047.

Warm regards,

Mrs. Neerja Birla
Founder & Chairperson
Aditya Birla Education Trust

Swipe

Empowering Rural Voices



A Grassroots Partnership for Lasting Change

In a modest room in rural Pune, as we engaged with a group of adolescent girls about menstrual health, Aarti, a young girl, with quiet determination, interjected, “Speaking to us is not enough, why don’t you also speak to our mothers?” This was not merely a comment; at Ujaas, it became an encouragement, giving us the perspective to engage with mothers, recognising that lasting change meant engaging those who shape a girl’s world.

Under the vision of my youngest daughter, Advaitesha, Ujaas launched a pilot programme in collaboration with Anganwadi workers (Sevikas), who were well-placed to connect with mothers in rural areas. As part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), they play a vital role in delivering health, nutrition, and education services to women, supporting them from early childhood through adolescence and into motherhood.

The objective of the pilot programme was to leverage their network to reach out to a larger audience and, in this process, to strengthen the knowledge and skills of Anganwadi workers so that they can effectively conduct training sessions within their communities. This programme covered seven districts of Maharashtra: Latur, Washim, Satara, Amravati, Pune, Nanded, and Yavatmal.

Each Anganwadi worker reaches over one thousand people, and they have been poised to reach nearly one in four people within their communities, each becoming a powerful advocate for grassroots change. Since the pilot project began, close to a thousand workers have been trained in menstrual health support and outreach.

This shift from training to transformation is best understood through the lived-in experiences of those at the heart of it. For Ahilya, a 40-year-old Anganwadi worker from Washim, the training evoked powerful memories. She recalled her first experience of menstruation, a confusing time with little clarity or support. The sessions, she said, made her realise how important it is to speak openly with girls who might be going through the same emotions of fear and uncertainty.

Sangita, another Anganwadi worker from Latur, reflected on an experience from her own childhood. She was at a community event when she got her period for the first time. Panicked, she turned to a friend, who gave her a handkerchief and told her not to mention it at home, otherwise, she would not be allowed to attend such events again. Sangita believes that such silence must be broken and that it is possible to create an environment where girls can manage menstruation without shame.

For some, the training also shaped the way they approached parenting. A mother and Anganwadi worker from Latur, reflecting on her ten-year-old daughter, shared that she now feels prepared to initiate conversations at home. The training made her realise the importance of early and open communication, something she herself did not experience growing up.

The changes are already becoming visible. Anganwadi workers have begun conducting awareness sessions in schools and community centres. Encouraging shifts are already visible. Girls are growing more confident, conversations at home are becoming more open, and mothers are emerging as powerful advocates for change.

But this is just the beginning.

Looking ahead, we aim to scale this initiative to engage a network of 50,000 Anganwadi workers, with the potential to positively impact the lives of 2 million young women and girls across India. Change may not be immediate, but it is taking root, and where it matters most to reduce period poverty in the country.

Prevention Takes Priority



Youth Mental Health Needs Early Action

India's youth form the heart of its demographic advantage. With more than half the population under the age of 25, the country stands at a unique point in history, poised for innovation, growth, and global leadership. Yet beneath the surface of potential lies a growing concern that rarely finds its way into mainstream discourse: the state of mental health among young Indians.

As the pressures of academic performance, social expectations, digital overwhelm, and economic uncertainty intensify, the mental health of India's adolescents has quietly emerged as a national concern. Suicide is now the leading cause of death among those aged 15 to 29. What makes the situation particularly pressing is that support systems are still largely reactive in nature. While conversations around mental health are becoming more mainstream, there remains a significant gap between awareness and structured, preventive support.

Resilience, empathy, and emotional well-being take root early in life. That is why early intervention is essential and is the first step towards lasting change in the mental health space. One of the most effective spaces for this is the school, where emotional well-being must become an integral part of everyday learning, not an add-on, but a core component of the curriculum. When mental health is woven into the daily fabric of school life, through open conversations, teacher training, peer-led initiatives, and life skills sessions, it normalises support and self-awareness. Adolescents begin to recognise emotions, express themselves, support their peers, and seek help when needed. We have seen this through our work with Mpower, where we have engaged with over 4,500 schools, training teachers to recognise early signs of anxiety and social pressure. These efforts have reached more than 0.4 million students, equipping them with essential mental health literacy. Ultimately, 80% of the students reported having developed more effective ways to manage stress and difficult situations and 73% of the students admitted that they handle conflicts and disagreements more peacefully now.

To keep this conversation ongoing and make it a natural part of everyday life, it must continue into the college years. It is because college is a phase marked by increased autonomy, shifting identities and future-facing anxiety. To support students through this transition, COPE, a Mental Health Club, offers a peer-led space where trained first responders address complex issues such as bullying, insomnia, loneliness, academic pressure, and relationship concerns.

The club enables safe conversations and the early identification and intervention of suicide-related symptoms, ensuring timely care and support when it matters most.

The solution lies not in waiting for a breakdown, but in ensuring that young people never reach the point of suicide. Over the years, we at Mpower have learnt that lasting change in mental health stems from a focused approach built on four pillars: early intervention, support in higher education, policy integration, and meaningful partnerships. These pillars remain at the heart of our commitment.

To highlight these four pillars, foster collaboration, and align diverse perspectives, the Mpowering Minds Summit 2025, hosted by Mpower in Mumbai, brought together distinguished voices from various sectors to address the silent struggles of our youths' mental health. Over 350 changemakers from education, healthcare, policy, research, journalism, civil society, and global institutions, including Harvard Medical School, the World Economic Forum, and Mental Health First Aid International, deeply engaged with the summit on finding pathways to safeguard our youth and support them in becoming healthier and more productive.

When mental health literacy is embedded across classrooms, staff rooms, family conversations and digital spaces, we build a society where mental well-being is not an afterthought, but a national priority, visible, valued, and actively supported.

MPOWER

Building Resilience in High-Stress Roles



Setting a Precedent for Mental Health in Security Forces

Mental health has never lent itself easily to measurement. There are no scans to detect loneliness, no metrics to capture quiet despair. It is often a silent struggle, especially among those who are trained to appear composed.

At Mpower, we have seen this unfold across various uniformed services in high-pressure jobs. The emotional cost of duty often runs deep, tucked behind routines, uniforms, and a culture where silence is seen as strength. So, when we began hearing from within the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), stories of rising stress, breakdowns, and a growing emotional strain, it did not come as a shock. It came as a confirmation of what we already knew: that those who protect us are often the least protected when it comes to mental well-being.

It was a call for change. And it needed to be systemic, compassionate, and rooted in understanding. That is how Project Mann took shape. And today, a quiet shift is underway, measurable, visible, and deeply encouraging. Since the programme began, the CISF has reported a 40% reduction in suicides.

The men and women of the CISF operate under conditions that most of us would find hard to imagine. I remember the story of Pradeep, an officer who was on duty when his eldest niece, newly married, fell suddenly ill. He was devastated, but could not leave his post or be with his family. The weight of helplessness stayed with him. He thought about reaching out, but held back, afraid of being judged or talked about. So, he kept it to himself and carried on.

His story is not uncommon. Within the CISF, long hours, constant vigilance, and emotional isolation are part of the structure. The hierarchy is rigid, leave is scarce, and many find themselves turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms. But when cases of suicide and self-harm began to rise, the silence could no longer be justified. That is when the CISF took the path-revealing step of partnering with Mpower to launch Project Mann — a quiet, considered effort to bring stigma-free, confidential mental health support to personnel across the country.

We knew that support could not be effective if it was distant, complicated, or conditional. It had to be immediate and accessible, not just during a crisis, but well before it.

With that in mind, 20 psychologists were deployed across more than 70 locations in India, including the Parliament. To complement this, a 24/7 helpline was activated, ensuring immediate and confidential access to support. It has managed over 24,000 calls, enabling real-time assistance and ongoing well-being checks. Over the past few years, the initiative has reached over two lakh CISF personnel through therapy sessions, awareness workshops, and ongoing psychological support.

I have heard this transformation in the voices of those whom we have reached out to.

“We often move from duty to home and back without pause. We do not realise what patterns we are forming in ourselves,” shared Subhakanta Das, from the CISF unit at the Taj Mahal. “These sessions have helped us understand work-life balance and taught us how to spot the early signs before things spiral. Indirectly, Project Mann is protecting the protectors.”

Savita, another officer, spoke of a deeply personal shift.

“I was overwhelmed by family issues. The anxiety and depression were hard to explain, even to myself. But after just a few sessions with the Project Mann counsellors, things began to shift. The guidance was gentle, thoughtful, and it helped me feel positive, more hopeful.”

The initiative began in 2020, and the CISF has reported a 40% reduction in suicides. However, perhaps the most telling change is not in the statistics; it is in the mindset. When we began this journey with the CISF, therapy was not a comfortable word. Now, officers are reaching out not just at breaking point, but earlier, when the pressure first begins to build.

This shift has been possible because of shared intent. CISF leadership has been proactive, helping create programmes that are both structured and sensitive to ground realities.

This initiative has underscored the need for mental health care to be both preventive and curative, empowering individuals to recognise distress early and ensuring appropriate support when needed. The path forward lies in institutionalisation. Just as we have in-house medical and culinary personnel, psychological support must also be embedded within the forces or workplace to ensure sustainable change in the mental well-being of the workforce in any sector.

Every Learning Journey Is Not Linear



Opening Pathways for Every Kind of Learner

For many children, the path to learning is a structured, predictable progression, an ascent marked by steady milestones. But for those with learning disabilities, the journey is far less linear. Their struggles often go unnoticed in the early years, dismissed as momentary lapses or quirks they will “outgrow.” By the time these challenges become impossible to ignore, they have already shaped the child’s self-perception, often leaving them battling not just academic hurdles but an internalised sense of inadequacy.

The earliest indicators of learning difficulties are often nuanced: an absence of sustained eye contact, delayed response to auditory cues, or difficulty grasping sequential instructions. Left unaddressed, these challenges morph into deeply embedded struggles, making the process of unlearning and relearning far more arduous than it needs to be.

Support for children with learning difficulties often depends on when their needs are recognised and how schools respond. Early identification allows learning to be adapted to a child’s unique pace, acknowledging that not all children progress in the same way. With this in mind, the Aditya Birla Integrated School (TABIS) and Nalanda School offer support at different stages in a child’s school journey, creating space for diverse needs to be understood and nurtured.

TABIS provides early, structured support for those identified at a younger age, shaping learning pathways that align with each child’s pace and strengths. We also embed therapies within the school day, sparing pupils the burden of after-school interventions and ensuring learning remains natural and supportive.

Nalanda was created to provide a supportive environment for children diagnosed later, including those who have faced disruptions in mainstream schooling. The focus is on helping students re-engage with learning in a way that feels achievable and meaningful.

Both schools share an inclusive approach that values not just academics but also vocational skills, creativity, and individual talent. The teachers play a vital role here; they are equipped to respond to individual learning needs with empathy and flexibility, rather than follow uniform methods.

Our focus has always been on teachers adapting our education to meet individual requirements, and kids with different learning styles. That is the reason we keep a student-teacher ratio as low as 7:1. The teachers provide individualised attention, focusing on remediation, phonics, basic arithmetic and emotional well-being, allowing students to learn at their own rhythm.

At their core, both educational institutions move away from the idea of a single standard for success. Instead, we are focused on helping children thrive at their own pace and honouring their potential rather than holding them to rigid academic norms.

At TABIS, Manav, a quiet boy who once avoided eye contact and struggled with severe reading challenges, discovered an unexpected gift. Amid the school’s music rooms and therapy-led learning environment, he discovered rhythm and fluency not through textbooks but through sound. Today, he is a recording artist with multiple singles released on streaming platforms, blending lyrics and melody to articulate emotions that words once failed to capture on paper.

Riddhi, a young girl who came to Nalanda after struggling for years in a traditional school setting, slowly began to rebuild her confidence through a more flexible and supportive approach to learning. What began as an after-school culinary activity blossomed into a calling. Today, she is a sous-chef, crafting bespoke menus and known for her national culinary showcases.

These stories are not outliers; they are testaments to what is possible when support meets learning opportunity. Studies suggest that anywhere between 9% and 39% of schoolchildren in India may face Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs), yet early detection and support often remain out of reach for many. Children with learning differences are present in every classroom, not just in private schools but also in government and low-income schools. For meaningful change, inclusive practices must move beyond a handful of institutions and become embedded across the entire education system in India, which will ensure the Right to Education for every child in the truest sense.