



This is a transcript of the radio interview featuring our CEO Saurabh Taneja and School Leader from AVBS Chinmaya Potnis with RJ Kanchan on AIR FM Rainbow.

RJ: Good morning everyone and I have two very special guests with me today and we are going to talk about a noble cause. Because today we have with us, someone who represents the youth and the education sector. I am intrigued and I would want to know more about what they do. A small introduction about our guests for today, we have Mr Saurabh Taneja; CEO of the Akanksha Foundation and with him, we have the School Leader from Acharya Vinoba Bhave School, Chinmaya Potnis.

Good morning Saurabh!

Saurabh: Hi! Good morning!

RJ: And with Saurabh we also have Chinmaya. We talk about a lot of schools; private schools, government schools but let's understand what special are they doing since schools and colleges are shut due to COVID-19. Saurabh I would request you to go ahead and tell us what are you doing to tackle this lockdown.

Saurabh: Sure, so we run 21 schools in Mumbai and Pune in partnership with the Pune Municipal Corporation as well as the MCGM. Our school leaders and our teachers are constantly in touch with the 9000 students we impact. We are using the low-cost accessible devices and apps like WhatsApp to ensure we continue to keep our students as well as their parents engaged for 3-4 hours every single day for the last 3 and a half weeks. You will notice that the way the students and the parents are responding is absolutely incredible. There are Yoga sessions happening with the help of WhatsApp videos for students as young as 4 years old and there are Google classrooms used by kids as old as 15 years old.

RJ: Great! The Akanksha Foundation is a part of this mission I would now like to ask Chinmaya; how are teachers going about this? Do they get some type of training? Because teachers might not be used to teaching online.

Chinmaya: We have been using technology in our schools on a daily basis regularly. Teachers are also using this time to read a lot of resources on a varied range of topics. Even the teachers are constantly connected with one another through calls and group discussions on the books they are reading. Teachers are working hard to stay connected with the students on a daily basis. There is work shared with students over WhatsApp group. Teachers are also calling students every two days and checking if they are doing well in terms of health and learning. Our teachers are also undertaking online courses which will help them in their professional development. There is a lot of collaboration and innovation and planning which is happening in our schools. Students are writing gratitude journals.

RJ: Saurabh, over to you, how are you looking into the well-being of your staff members? Especially because these are challenging times and everyone is human after all.

Saurabh: There are 3 levels to this. One is definitely thinking about our children and their families. We started very early on Project Karuna where we identified close to 1000 vulnerable families in the very first week of lockdown in Maharashtra. Karuna stands for compassion and our Social workers and our parents; the school management committee members were brought into action very very early on in Mumbai and Pune and in the very first week we managed to support close to

1000 families with essentials, groceries and hygiene kits. Next phase, in the next 10 days; we supported close to 1500 more families. Till date, our social workers and our teachers have been in touch with families who need immediate support. Even we have 700 employees within Akanksha; we have also institutionalised the mechanism to ensure that our people are safe and they are taking care of their well-being. We have 3 initiatives keeping that in mind. All the managers are supposed to be doing weekly check-ins with their team members on just well-being. Just to make sure our people are safe and are driven and motivated. Our counselling team has started an initiative called 'The Listening Space' within Akanksha where you can reach out to the counsellors 2-3 hours on a daily basis. We have an internal helpline for people to talk to about any challenges they are facing. We have relaxed the expectation of working from home. It is very important to realise that this is not the usual work from home time. People are dealing with a lot of medical crisis at home and there is a lot of stress about the availability of ration and even for people who are more privilege like us, we have kind of relaxed the criteria of what is expected and reoriented our goal. And also that our medical insurance cover takes care of any kind of medical needs right now, we have kind of made that information accessible and available to all our employees to make sure that we are on top of their well-being as well.

RJ: Lovely! We will continue this interesting discussion with you after this song!

RJ: Welcome back! I really want to know what next? I mean after the pandemic, what changes you foresee gauging the current situation we are in today.

Saurabh: So there are two things we would be prioritizing, one; definitely our children will not be the same again nor our educators. For the first two months after the students come back, we will definitely focus a lot on post trauma and counselling sessions and the key question

for us to answer now as educators is what is worth learning in our schools. I think that's a very fundamental question as to what has brought about this pandemic is what should we as humanity need to do to be able to respond effectively in our own spheres of life and I think that is a very critical question for all of us as educators to answer. Second is how do we bridge the digital divide that is also staring us in our face right now. Not all our children and parents have access to basic equipment or infrastructure that will allow learning to continue and the education sector will not remain the same and we need to do everything we can to make sure that our children and families don't fall too far behind in this digital age. I think these are the fundamental questions we will need to stay focussed on. We will love to hear what Chinmaya has to say as a principle.

Chinmaya: It is going to be quite difficult for us to normalize everything once the school reopens. Likewise for students, parents and teachers. This particular gap has just allowed everyone to be grateful for things we have and also reflect on things we can do better, opportunities we probably missed out on. So I think it is definitely going to be an enriching experience post the pandemic once we get back to school. At the same time, we just have to be so much more conscious about our mental well-being, social-emotional learning for children. I think curriculum and core text will take a backseat and I think we would just want to come together and have that known touch to our teaching and learning.

RJ: It is great to listen to you and it is quite intriguing what you shared. Saurabh, I would like to ask you if someone wants to be a part of Akanksha's mission, how one should get in touch with your organisation.

Saurabh: Thank you Kanchan. People can go to our website www.akanksha.org. We have an online donation campaign that is live right now. It is assisting the families with essentials right now and is supporting the learning. This is

a very immediate support you can offer. And in the next 2-3 months from now, this year I think the need for having new volunteers who can support the schools and the children to bring their life back to normalcy is going to be incredibly important. So if there are people out there who have been thinking of volunteering but have been on the fringes and on the edge thinking where to do or not do, this is not the year to think about it the second time but to go and enrol yourselves to become volunteers and when things start getting back to normal in the next 3-6 months hopefully; we would love to get in touch with you and see how you can support our children in the longer run.

RJ: Lovely, Saurabh. And Chinmaya your final thoughts?

Chinmaya: I just want to express a lot of gratitude to all the educators around the world; everyone who is trying to stay in touch with children and maximising the time thinking of the well-being themselves and their children. Huge words of appreciation for them. And I think that let's just hope for a more positive outcome post a couple of days once this pandemic is over and I really look forward to it.

RJ: Lovely! Thank you for being with RJ Kanchan on AIR FM Rainbow! Thank you to both of you and stay tuned.