

## WHY VIDYAPOSHAK?

*“Empowering the Student Community”*

Vidyaposhak (VP), a registered society, was started in 2001 with a belief that investment in higher education provides significant dividends far beyond individual achievement to contribute for overall betterment of the society. Youth are aspiration of any country. Entire community and the nation as a whole, benefits from a greater, effective and quality higher-education. It is here that Vidyaposhak brings in interventions to handhold the student community to sail through safe and strong to achieve their academic goals on one hand and to lead a quality professional and personal life, which ultimately causes for the effective quality development of the nation as a whole.

The heart of Vidyaposhak’s philosophy lies in the slogan: *“empowering the student community.”* Empowerment is a broad and multifaceted concept, and Vidyaposhak strives through its various programs to touch on every aspect of empowerment. Part of that is of course economic empowerment. In order to succeed in the contemporary world, a degree from an accredited institution is absolutely necessary for economic mobility, and Vidyaposhak aims to provide impoverished but academically bright students with the financial resources without which they would be unable to pursue their higher education. Without economic support higher education would be often be unthinkable for Vidyaposhak beneficiaries, and VP strives to take a holistic approach even towards financial assistance: this is why students are not simply given a cheque to cover their college fees, but are also provided with resources to cover their transportation cost and importantly to cater to need of text books, through a network of library support.

But financial empowerment is just the beginning. In order to understand the uniqueness of Vidyaposhak’s work, one must understand the problems being faced by the impoverished or disadvantaged (in terms of accessibility, quality exposure and financial security for education) students in India. The first problem lies with the fact that these students spend their fifteen years of formal education learning passively. In most of the government primary schools, that are accessible by majority of the pupils especially in rural and poor urban pockets, there are no opportunities for presentations, group work, discussions, experimentation or hands-on learning. In science classes formulas are memorized but never applied to the real world or discovered through experiments, in English courses grammar rules are drilled but speaking is never encouraged. In fact, even asking questions in class is discouraged or simply not customary. In such a system there is no scope for independent or creative thought: instead students are encouraged to “by-heart” or memorize the contents of their textbooks and lectures and not think beyond the syllabus that is placed in front of them – and of course this knowledge often goes no further than short term memory that only lasts through exam time. The poor quality of the knowledge thus gained is exacerbated by undertrained, apathetic or underpaid teachers, a lack of basic infrastructure (such as blackboards and classrooms) and an enormous class size.

As a result of this system of passive knowledge the students emerge without the necessary critical thinking ability, analytical skills or communication skills necessary to

succeed in the real world. This is immediately demonstrated by the timidity, lack of confidence and an inability to express themselves seen in so many disadvantaged students. Even a task as simple as standing up and introducing oneself becomes an insurmountable obstacle for such students. They have no concept of how to lead or work with a team, or how to think outside the box or problem-solve. This lack of soft and critical thinking skills puts students at an extreme disadvantage when it comes to finding and gaining meaningful employment. Without communication skills, the students are bound to fail at interviews. Without leadership and teamwork abilities, they cannot succeed once they do get hired. And the lack of independent thinking ability is debilitating throughout life, whether at the job or in any decision-making scenario. Basic skill of computer usage including internet, is also observed as missing in most of the disadvantaged students, which is highly assessed in any job recruitment in this competitive world. Through its philosophy of holistic empowerment, Vidyaposhak endeavors to fill these gaps. VP's training programs – ranging from 'Bridge Camps' to Graduate Finishing School(GFS), weekend workshops to the CHANGE program – give students the training they lack in communication skills, independent thinking, computer literacy, teamwork and leadership and other soft skills. Most importantly, VP strives to subvert the passive-learning paradigm inculcated in the schools and colleges, by having the students be the center of the learning process, by focusing on active and participator-based learning through activities, games and real-world application.

Another issue facing Vidyaposhak beneficiaries is the lack of English proficiency. Because most go to government schools, the majority of VP students study in local medium till tenth standard, and many have no option but to continue in local medium through twelfth or until the completion of their degree. The students have no scope to learn or practice spoken English, and it is their conversation skills and confidence in the language that suffer the most. It becomes difficult for these students to find and compete for a meaningful and deserving employment without English skills, as English being a global language. This is why Vidyaposhak views a student's proficiency in the English language as one of the critical areas in empowering the student community. Many of VP's training programs are focused around practical and conversational ability in the English language, and students are often encouraged to learn English by actively speaking without fear – for the first time in their lives, through creation of a favourable environment.

It is also important to realize the family background of many of these students. Many students are not simply first-generation college students, but are first generation *literate*s of their families. Majority of their parents are marginal farmers or petty laborers. They have no one in their family to turn to for guidance as to their education and career path. Many have no knowledge of what kind of education opportunities are out there and how to make decisions as to their future. Those that try to find employment do not have any idea of where to look, how to appear for an interview or how to put together a resume. Rarely do they get guidance from their academic institution. Vidyaposhak empowers their students with the necessary knowledge. We act as a guide for any student seeking advice, help with finding out about employment opportunities, and offer formal sessions on career guidance and the skills needed for a successful job search. More than that, VP also exposes these students – who so often spend their lives in the same small rural or poor urban community – to an awareness of the ideas and culture of the outside world. For example, VP takes into account gender issues

during their student training programs, and tries to have students come out of their stereotypes and hesitations. Vidyaposhak is also taking up new initiatives to expose students to social issues, and to create a movement of change-makers on college campuses. Beginning to understand and positively shape the world around you is after all one of the strongest forms of empowerment.

Finally, the spirit of Vidyaposhak's philosophy of holistic empowerment is simply being there for the students. If the students need guidance, counseling or simply someone to call, Vidyaposhak team is eager to take up that role. VP team strives to build close personal relationships with the students they work with, and do not hesitate to give out their personal contact information and to spend time talking with or counseling students during and outside of work hours. In short, Vidyaposhak acts as a surrogate or extended family for the needs of the students.

Thus at Vidyaposhak the empowerment of the student community is approached holistically: not just economic, but also skill-based, intellectual and emotional empowerment is all a part of Vidyaposhak's philosophy. Seeing the life-long transformation that occurs in a Vidyaposhak student after years of such empowerment is a true vision of sustainable development.

To know more about our programs and processes please do visit [www.vidyaposhak.ngo](http://www.vidyaposhak.ngo)