

Annual Report

Akshara - FREA

2023-24



RISE
above
the NOISE

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Acknowledgements

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From the Co-Directors

The strength of each member makes a strong collective. In the last year, we made significant strides towards enhancing public consciousness around gender equality. This was made possible by joining forces with individuals and organisations who brought their own unique perspectives to our shared vision of a gender-just and violence-free society.

We are proud to say that we deepened our existing partnerships whilst forging new ones. Our work reached new places and new people and together we demonstrated the power of collaboration and community.

Akshara's approach accomplished this through its engagement with youth and women, and collaborating with local authorities and institutions, including the media. Our team has strived to mobilise public support through information dissemination to increase awareness and create safe and equitable cities.

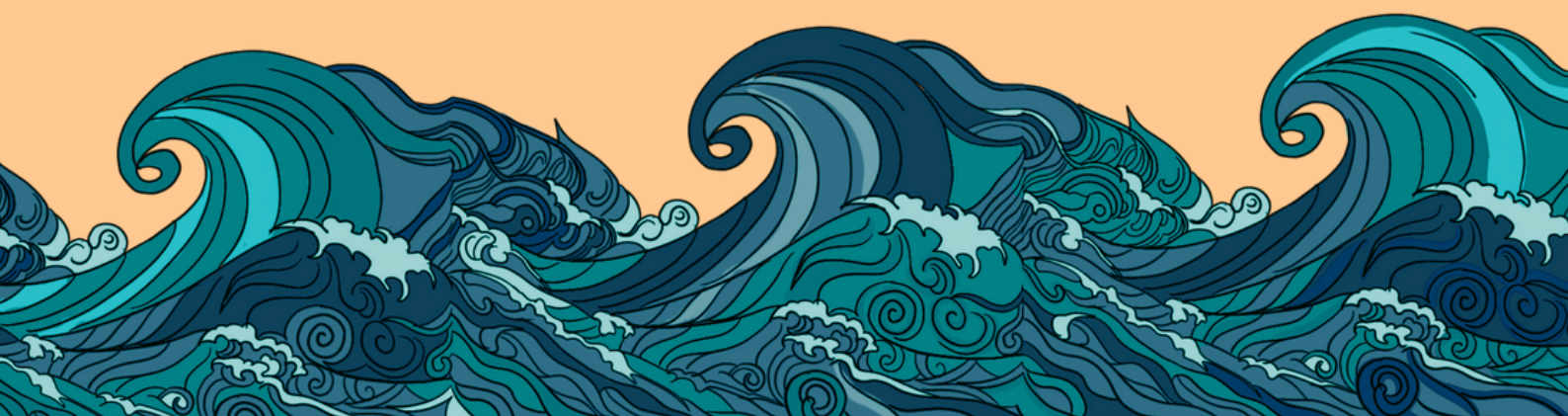
This past year, Akshara's work reached over **2,500** students across **38** colleges in three cities—Mumbai, Pune, and Nashik and **244** young women, all first generation college learners. Through our flagship programs, ***Empowering Dreams and Youth for Change***, we trained several young people to discuss and advocate for the issues they care about at home and



in society, and assert their rights. The election year raised questions about citizenship and inspired us to find new ways to empower youth. Apart from our work in building agency through workshops and public interventions on sexual harassment, self-image, and democratic rights, we helped **120** students register on the electoral roll.

Young women who spoke about menstruation in hushed tones participated in the very public **Red Bloom campaign** for the first time with **Masika Mahotsav** through activities, quizzes, and discussions at Mumbai's Marine Drive. In a patriarchal society, concepts like menstruation and gender division of labour are difficult to accept as we have been socialised to believe differently. Our students successfully put it into practice through our **Ghar Ka Kaam Sabka Kaam** campaign, which sensitised men about unpaid domestic work to reduce the pressure on women, enabling them to join the workforce.

Our safety walks for street sexual harassment became much-needed catalysts for increased inclusivity and safety in educational institutions. The result was better-lit spaces and a gender-neutral washroom, demonstrating a tangible commitment to creating a safer and more inclusive learning environment for students. Furthermore, our ongoing collaboration with the public bus authorities resulted in the award-winning **Jagah Dikhao** campaign on sexual harassment in public transport, and a video which garnered a whopping 10.5 million views. It was one among our many campaigns to change mindsets for advancing gender equality. Our work gained international attention when Our Better World, a Singapore



based storytelling initiative, featured us on their platform. Our constant endeavour to include gender in urban planning bore fruit with the inauguration of India's first Multipurpose Housing for Working Women on Women's Day in Mumbai. Our work also led us to architecture colleges, where we organised the '**Engendering Cities**' workshop for students of Master of Architecture and Urban Design. We produced several resources for the state and municipality with the aim of to make policies, laws, and planning more inclusive and sensitive to the needs of women.

Our power lies in mobilising the community with the skills required to achieve our shared goals. Our alliances with other organisations helped deepen our understanding of how we can improve our engagement with youth.

We are grateful for the unwavering support of our partners who inspired and motivated students to act and achieve the goals they set their minds and hearts to. Feminist cities, where every citizen - including young women from marginalised communities - are given equal opportunities and employment and empowered to move freely, breaking the cycle of inequality, are key to a gender - just future. This is our shared belief.

The future is feminist and every action in the present counts.

Nandita Gandhi

Nandita Shah



Who we are

If youth are passionate about an issue or a cause, they can act to change the world. Akshara sees itself as a catalyst for social change which encourages young people to understand inequalities in society and take small incremental steps towards change. Our programs take youth on a journey from their personal experiences, towards understanding societal relations and social change actions.



We at Akshara do this through three programs.

The first one brings together young women from marginalised backgrounds to train them to believe in themselves. We have created the space for them to explore their skills, sowing seeds for dreams that they want to fulfil and goals they want to achieve. Our engagements are designed for them to apply their acquired skills in real life. We empower them to overcome their fears, stand up to discrimination, sexual harassment, and gain access to education and employment. The realisation of their agency instils self-belief in these young women who go on to break entrenched stereotypes.



Our second program builds a community of college going youth and strives for gender equality. Akshara emboldens them to make personal and social changes in their own lives and those of others in the context of gender equality. This involves engaging young men and women to actively participate in the process of building a gender-just world. Our work has resonated with hundreds of youth in Mumbai, Pune, and Nashik.



We realise that we need to work at both the micro and macro levels. Our third program organises public campaigns to transform people's gender beliefs and engages with governmental and municipal bodies to impact policies and gender norms. We have conducted award-winning campaigns on sexual harassment, contributed to discussions on women's safety, and pushed for gender sensitive urban planning and action. We have been recognised with the Community Catalyst Award from an international organisation for advancing gender inclusion in the transport system.

We work towards a world where gender equality is the norm, not a rarity.

Young Women Learn to Dream

Her Journey

“Being a part of Akshara’s Empowering Dreams Program has made me more confident and willing to speak for myself and others. I’ve started sharing what I learned at home, teaching my family about gender rights and supporting women’s empowerment. Initially, my family was apprehensive about my joining Akshara due to safety concerns, but after learning about the program’s goals, they supported my decision. The Saksham program has taught me to assert myself in difficult situations, like standing up for a friend being bullied. I am eager to become a senior peer mentor for the program next year.

I am Kulsum from Govandi, and I study at Acharya College. I have five siblings: two elder sisters, a younger brother, and two elder brothers who couldn’t complete their education due to financial difficulties. Our family’s financial situation is tough, especially with my father’s health issues; he manages a fruit stall, while one of my brothers works as a driver.

The program has empowered me by teaching life skills, building self-belief, and raising awareness about rights. The sessions on mental health, menstrual health, and dealing with harassment and gender-based violence have been particularly helpful. Recently, I intervened to help a neighbour, whose conservative family controls what she should wear. I spoke to her mother, but changing her deep-rooted beliefs proved challenging. These experiences have inspired me to work for women’s rights in the future. I realise that not all girls have the same freedoms and opportunities. I want to create better support systems and run campaigns to change attitudes that oppress women and girls.”



Learning to resist

"I am Sadhna, currently in my second year of a bachelor's degree in management studies. I live with my parents and have three siblings; my father runs a tea stall, and managing my education has been challenging for my family. To support myself, I sought assistance from Akshara, where I received scholarships and attended workshops on gender issues, violence, and communication skills.

I have always lived with violence in my family. When I reach out to my extended family for help, they do not want to get involved. Everyone considers it normal to suffer violence in one's home—like a father beating his family. How can that be normal? Now I have started questioning it and will take action. Things will change slowly.

The negotiation workshop was a turning point for me, helping me bridge communication gaps with my parents and understand my father's anger. Strengthened by Akshara's sessions, I recognised issues like violence and discrimination in my community. I began advocating for hygiene and mental well-being, sparking positive change among my peers and breaking taboos around menstruation. I aim to continue my involvement with Akshara, focusing on empowering individuals and communities. I want to become a social worker and have worked hard to bring girls from my neighbourhood to Akshara's Saksham programs.

I shared my learnings with my family, and they became more cooperative. Akshara's holistic approach gave me the confidence to challenge societal norms and build healthier interpersonal relationships."



The Empowering Dreams Program

We worked with **244** young women this year

Our educational scholarships lent them the support to complete their formal education and delayed early marriage.

- ✦ **10** skill-building workshops honed their capabilities whilst developing newer perspectives of the world of work.
- ✦ **9** workshops fostered their belief in equality and their own abilities with the realisation that discrimination and violence were not personal but systemic problems.
- ✦ **13** exposure visits helped them understand themselves through their goals and aspirations.
- ✦ Many become leaders by raising their voice against inequalities and violence by participating in public campaigns.

Every year, Akshara's Empowering Dreams Program (EDP) transforms the lives of young women from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds by supporting their aspirations. EDP specifically engages with second and third-generation migrant women and first-generation college-goers between the ages of 17 and 20 who are determined to pursue their education. The majority of our participants hail from some of the most marginalised areas of Mumbai - Govandi, Chembur, Mankurd, Bandra East and Jogeshwari where they live in chawls or one room tenements. 51% of them were Hindus and 43% were Muslims, both in the Saffron ration card holders group (Below Poverty Line). Their families were largely nuclear with 4 to 5 members. Usually the father was the main earner working in the informal sector characterised by low wages, job insecurity and negligible benefits.

Saksham's Immersive Workshops

Saksham is the first step in the EDP journey, followed by **Swayamsidha** and **Swadhin**.

The workshops organised as a part of Saksham, on building agency, rethinking beauty standards, public and communication skills, have brought the young women closer to getting to know themselves and their interests. These workshops have taught them to recognise the role of societal norms like patriarchy in perpetuating violence, identify red flags in relationships and to fight back abuse without compromising their safety.

Immersive workshops had a positive impact of the young women. Once the young women understood the art of negotiation, they became confident and comfortable speaking to their parents and navigating mobility restrictions, marriage pressures, and family dynamics. The **Beauty Within and Outside** workshop made them realise that beauty was more than cosmetics, fair skin, or stylish clothing; it is rooted in confidence, individuality, and overall health and well-being. Through the workshop on **Public Speaking and Communication**, they gained valuable tools to channel their confidence, enhance their self-awareness, and improve their interpersonal skills. Participatory sessions centred on **The Change I Want to See in My Economic Status and Community** enhanced their understanding of health, safety, and career opportunities.



Perseverance

"I must travel and do various internships as part of this course. My family has never heard of such things. A girl travelling without family members, with college mates, these things are not very acceptable for them. I used to feel frustrated earlier, but after the workshop on negotiation I have started explaining things peacefully. I believe that change will come. I will keep on trying and achieve my dream."

- Pragati Satardekar

Feedback from the participants of the Saksham Program

- ✦ 60% developed a positive gender attitude.
- ✦ 60% understood gender concepts and the division of labour.
- ✦ 53% felt that girls should not blame themselves for violence.
- ✦ Nearly 70% agreed that true beauty is about accepting individuality.
- ✦ Almost 80% established clear career goals.
- ✦ Close to 70% felt confident commuting alone.



Swayamsidha: the second year

115 were selected for continuing support and inclusion in the Swayamsidha which focused on workplace skills. They learnt job-oriented skills, etiquette, negotiation strategies, and developed a voice for collective advocacy. The young women also realised the importance of women's financial independence. They discussed gender-based violence, and engaged in discussions about societal challenges, including gender disparities in workshops.


Getting closer to a career

"Skill-building workshops and mentoring have helped me gain clarity on my short-term goals. My mentor is based in Bangalore and works with TCS. He has guided me very well toward my career goals. Through his support, I completed two additional courses from TCS iON and received certificates as well. He encouraged me to pursue internships. The skill-building workshops helped me prepare my CV, and now I feel more confident."

- Sharon Nazrath



The women became well-versed with the tools to navigate the complexities of the modern workforce. The workshops imparted training on essential communication skills, including crafting effective CVs and cover letters, interviewing, and salary negotiations. These workshops, additional activities and exposure visits significantly expanded their learning and understanding of various career options in an evolving job market.



Most of the Swayamsidha participants gained the confidence to apply for jobs.

- ◆ **90%** felt better prepared for job interviews after enhancing their CVs.
- ◆ **87%** expressed a strong commitment to being part of the workforce after marriage.
- ◆ **85%** believed that working women do not receive the support or respect they deserve.
- ◆ **53%** recognised that working women possess purchasing power.

Swadhin: The Change Makers

21 participants were selected for continuing in EDP's third step or Swadhin which focused on collective, social change action in the public sphere.

The participants eagerly used the opportunity to take up small social change projects and actions. One of their ventures was becoming mentors to new participants. They organised exposure visits to a nearby bank and showed them the advantages of having an account and using the ATM. They also conducted 19 police station visits and facilitated **12** melas involving **100** participants.

"At first, obtaining permission from the police felt scary, and I was apprehensive. However, they were very cooperative, and provided us with valuable information about the entire process of seeking permissions."

- Mubashera

"I was afraid to go to the police station, so I took my mother with me. We waited for 15 minutes, and my fear began to fade away after I started talking to the head constable."


- Soniya



Parliamentary elections provided new participants with the opportunity to exercise their right to vote. The enrollment of these young women was a step towards influencing change in their communities. **30** young new voters were registered by the Swadhin members, empowering them to influence democracy at the grassroots level.

They emerged as leaders in their communities, guiding and supporting other women while driving meaningful change. This year, the women actively engaged in discussions on gender, sexuality, reproductive health, menstruation, hygiene, and negotiation. Exposure visits, mentorship, and access to an information and placement hub nurtured their leadership potential and advanced their personal and professional goals.

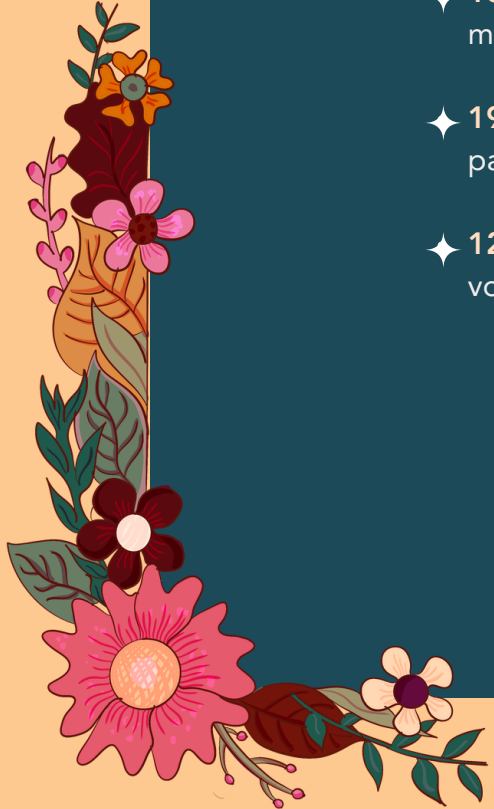
Organising community activities became a rich experience for these young women, allowing them to overcome their fears and develop confidence as community leaders. They took charge of everything from planning to execution and documentation. Knowing their rights sparked this hands-on involvement.



✦ **18** bank visits organised by Swadhin members for 160 new entrants.

✦ **19** police station visits with 171 participants.

✦ **12** Gender Melas with the support of 100 volunteers.



Learning through Participation

Most EDP events were organised by participants which shows the development and application of their organising and leadership skills. It helped boost their confidence and inspired them to take initiative in their communities. As they led these activities, they learnt valuable skills in planning, teamwork, and communication. Through these experiences, they built a strong foundation for their personal and professional growth.

Here are some events which they organised.



Khula Asmaan

In this annual event, the senior participants welcomed the new EDP entrants, and helped them get acquainted with their upcoming journey. The seniors shared their experiences, preparing the newest cohort for a year full of fun, learning, and empowerment. The event was attended by **228** people, including the young women, their parents, and other guests.

The joy of teamwork

"It was wonderful to be part of the Khula Asmaan organising team. Coordinating with Swadhin and Swayamsidha girls, working and planning together taught me teamwork and helped build friendships. When the Khula Asmaan event took place, it felt like all the hard work we put in was worth it. Whether it was managing the event on stage, anchoring and cheering the crowd, or the girls backstage arranging certificates and gifts, it felt good to be part of it. I am proud of us."

- Pradnya Nate



Parents meet their children

A mela created an informal setting that helped both parents and participants feel welcomed in the community. In a panel discussion titled “New-Age Parenting and Parent-Daughter Relationships” Mumtaz, an activist from CORO, and her daughter, a college student, opened up space for reflection. The young women also understood how resilience and passion can help them achieve their goals. Megha Ghadge, a talented artist, shared the challenges she faced in pursuit of her dreams. Rida and her team delivered a stunning dance performance, while Urmila Salunkhe enthralled the audience with her speech. The achievements of the young women and their hard work were celebrated through the recognition of leaders and participants who helped make the event a success.



Pyaar Wali Baatein

This event had 31 senior participants and alumni of the Empowering Dreams Program organise a dialogue on healthy relationships. A day of reflection and creative expression on love in a safe and supportive environment took away their initial apprehension. They were soon bold enough to take these ideas to people in parks and hold discussions about romance and the evolving nature of love.

All about love

“It was the first time I asked strangers about love and relationships. I learned a lot from this experience; some people were really confident and cooperative, while others were afraid to talk to us. There is still fear amongst youth about entering relationships and about their family’s reactions.”

- Ansari Noor-e-Jannat



Red Bloom

People hesitate to discuss menstruation. Our young volunteers overcame this challenge in the Red Bloom campaign which was organised along with Masika Mahotsav. Young women became agents of change in their communities as they openly spoke and discussed issues around menstruation like hygiene, sanitary pads and taboos.



Our Better World

Our Better World is a Singapore-based digital storytelling initiative which makes inspiring videos on people in Asian countries. Jayshree Belavade, an EDP alumna, was selected to tell her life story. She was able to fund and complete her education, despite her family's reluctance, through her determination and the support from the program's skill-building initiatives. Her journey titled 'Open Skies' was featured in a video which garnered over 9,200 views on Facebook, 55,000 on Instagram, and 65,300 on YouTube.

<https://www.ourbetterworld.org/series/women-empowerment/story/empowering-dreams-one-girl-at-a-time>

The Care Car Project

The Care Car Project raised close to Rs 25,00,000 for young women's education and support for pursuing non-traditional livelihoods. Co-Director Nandita Shah teamed up with the Care Car group, which includes Chitra Hiremath, Hansu Pardiwala, and Rina Valecha, to raise funds through a 2,400-kilometre road trip across 3 states.

Panel on young women's issues

We organised a Panel Discussion at the 4th Maharashtra Hinsa Mukti Parishad held in Ambajogai, Maharashtra on women's issues, which attracted approximately 230 participants from 32 organisations. Besides organising a panel discussion, we successfully managed a bookstall, produced feedback videos, and provided financial and logistical support.

Youth and Social Change

Empowering the youth

- ◆ 2500 Students
- ◆ 38 colleges across Mumbai, Nashik and Pune
- ◆ 38 Gender Equality Clubs
- ◆ 76 Group Leaders
- ◆ 750 student volunteers
- ◆ 42 Alumni Leaders



The Youth for Change Program (YCP) encourages young people to dismantle gender disparities and promote inclusion and equality. Akshara believes in harnessing the enthusiasm and potential of both young men and women, which has led us to 38 colleges on this transformative journey.

We offer two workshop modules focused on fundamental rights and gender equality. Through social actions like melas (information fairs), public campaigns, and film screenings, students are given the opportunity to advocate for gender equality and drive societal change. This foundation shapes their understanding of equality in society. We encourage them to challenge patriarchal stereotypes, gender roles, and unjust discrimination. In-depth discussions cover topics such as inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, relationships, women staying out late, and clothing choices.



We reached over 2500 people through 29 workshops on Active Citizenship and Gender.

- ◆ **97%** of students understood and remembered the Constitution and their fundamental rights.
- ◆ **83%** recognized inter-caste and inter-religious marriages as legal.
- ◆ **75%** understood the distinction between sex and gender.

An alumna's reminiscence

"As a group leader and alumna in the YCP for two years, I discovered the power of words, which helped me gain confidence and appreciate diverse perspectives. Akshara provided me with invaluable education and information in a supportive and non-judgmental environment. The connections I made and the opportunities I had, such as participating in competitions and events, significantly enriched my experience. Akshara has truly shaped who I am, and I now feel ready to embark on my future journey. "

- Ritika Natekar, Alumna, Vidyalankar School of Information Technology



The Alumni Circle

Students who have been with the YCP program can opt to re-join and be part of the Alumni Circle. These are mainly students who saw a transformation in themselves and are eager to mentor others. They form the Alumni Circle and together with the college-based Group Leaders spearhead events and programs with the new participants. This group of **118** students was instrumental in organising Friendship Week in **6** colleges, to show that friendship transcends gender, caste and societal barriers.

42 leaders from Mumbai, Pune and Nashik convened at the Leadership Camp in Navi Mumbai where they worked on their teamwork and communication skills as well as attended a session on mental health.



Gender Equality Clubs

There were a total of **76** Group Leaders guiding **750** student volunteers which helped in forging new connections with Women's Development Cells. We added four new colleges to our growing network of partners. **38** colleges based National Service Scheme (NSS) units across Mumbai, Nashik and Pune worked together with the YCP Team to engage Program Officers (POs) who aided in the formation of **38** Gender Equality Clubs in colleges.



Workshop: Our Lives, Our Rights

The power of change

"YCP brought us great joy. The interactive sessions and group activities provided a platform to bring out the best in everyone and learn valuable skills. Such an effective training will surely uplift us in professional and personal life.

- Yash Yeole, N.B. Thakur Law College, Nashik

"I am deeply grateful for the impactful workshops and the vibrant Youth Fest organised by Akshara. The workshops on citizenship rights and gender awareness were eye-opening, and the Youth Fest provided a platform for engaging in debates and performances. Thank you for your dedication to working with us."

- Neel Waghela, S K Somaiya College

Through role plays and discussions, students understood the daily violations of fundamental rights by elders, communities, and society. They became aware of interfaith relationships, workplace rights violations, and reservations in transport through the workshop on citizenship and fundamental rights. It was attended by 843 students across 3 cities.



Workshop: Are We Really Equal?

Students learn to take action

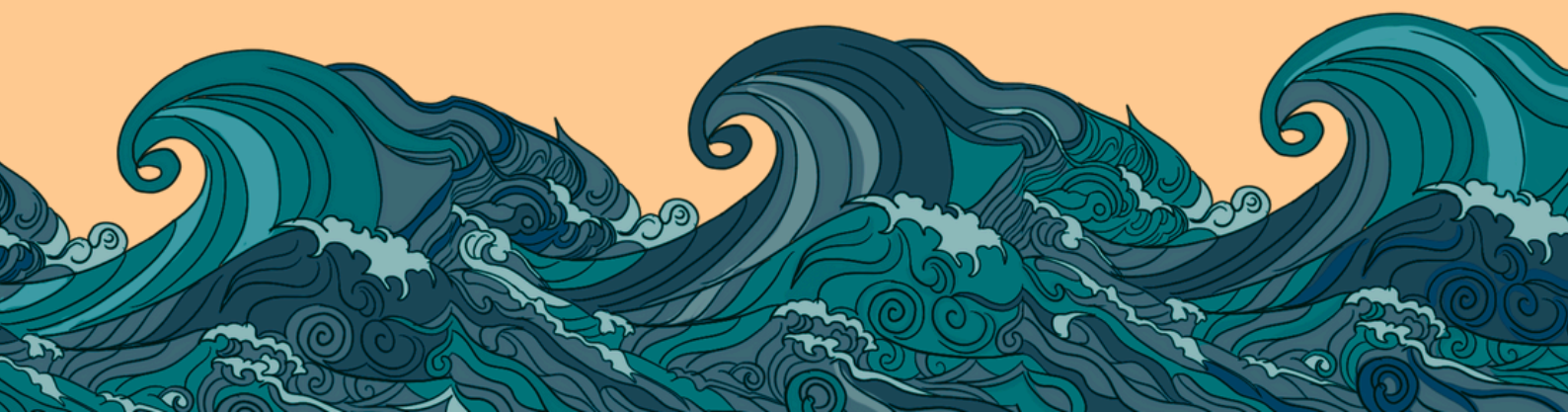
"The training on gender equality, combined with interactive activities, deepened my understanding and commitment to the cause. I am grateful to be part of this program, which has inspired me to actively promote gender equality and make a meaningful impact."

- Shreya Malvankar, St Xavier's College of Engineering

"Over nearly a year, we participated in various workshops on citizenship and gender equality. I believe that by extending the program beyond the academic year until we complete our degrees, it would help in enhancing our internal growth and overall development."

- Sameer Shaikh, College of Social Work, Nashik

This workshop helped students shift their understanding of gender dynamics towards equality. A total of 568 students across three cities participated in this workshop with its focus on gender norms and roles, societal notions, expectations, and power dynamics. It also helped them understand that men had a role to play in promoting gender equality in our society.



Social Actions – Playing it forward

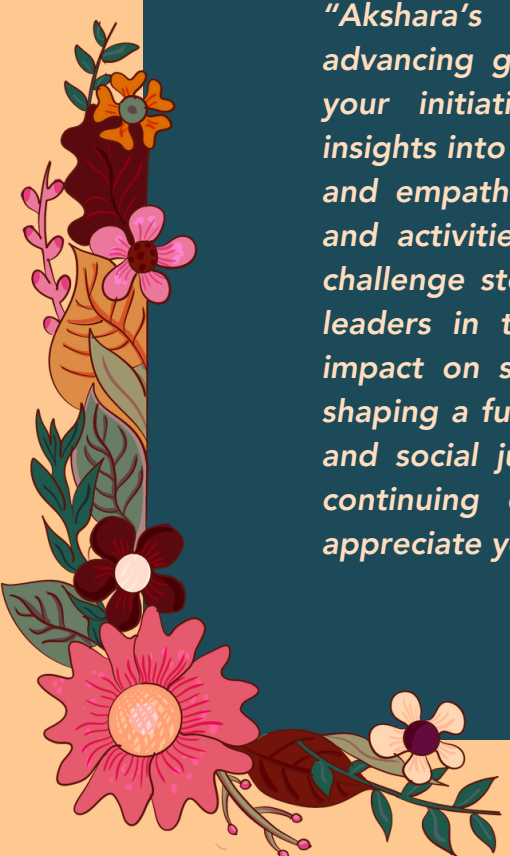
The workshops were followed by initiatives from the members of the college-based Gender Equality Clubs. The students were thrilled to apply their learnings by organising projects, campaigns, and activities in their colleges. They addressed real-life situations of gender inequality and citizenship through games, movie screenings, street plays, competitions, exhibitions, and interactive discussions.

- ✦ Students gained leadership and organisational experience during the **Yuvak Yuvati Melas or Gender Info Melas**, which are popular social action events. **1500** participants from **8** colleges attended various stalls on gender equality through games like **Scary House, Strike Master, Hit the Insecurities, and Stereotype Smash**.
- ✦ Students learnt that films are an effective medium to spark discussions on sensitive topics like violence and sexual harassment. They helped each other understand societal situations and engage in meaningful dialogues. **Two** documentary films, one in Hindi and the other in a regional language, affecting women and girls were chosen to reach a diverse audience.
- ✦ Students scripted and performed a play addressing body shaming and bullying which was enacted **thrice** for different audiences. It was accompanied by a poster exhibition on societal norms and stereotypes that perpetuate body-shaming, discrimination and inequality.
- ✦ This year, our **Safety Audit** method for understanding street sexual harassment was expanded to include more components. The response was encouraging. **18** students of the Women Development Cell at Mithibai College and Akshara brought out a Safety Audit Report. In response, the college improved lighting in unlit spaces and opened a gender-neutral washroom, demonstrating their commitment to creating a safer and more inclusive learning environment for students.
- ✦ Parliamentary elections meant that students got a chance to exercise their right to vote. A knowledgeable resource person took them through the process of voter registration. **90** students from these workshops opted to register as first-time voters.

- ◆ A youth summit was organised by the **Centre for Youth Development and Activities (Pune)**, our partner organisation, to celebrate their silver jubilee. The collective efforts of the YCP volunteers ensured that all participants had a memorable experience, contributing to the event's success. This summit provided a vital platform for young leaders to collaborate, discuss, and explore solutions to contemporary issues. Akshara's alumni from Mumbai showcased a vibrant dance performance during the cultural segment.



**Shubham Kartude, Lecturer and
Program Officer from Valia College says:**



"Akshara's dedication to empowering women and advancing gender equity is truly commendable. Through your initiatives, our students have gained invaluable insights into gender issues, contributing to a more inclusive and empathetic society. By organising engaging sessions and activities, your NGO has equipped our students to challenge stereotypes, champion equality, and emerge as leaders in the pursuit of a fairer world. The profound impact on students extends well beyond the classroom, shaping a future generation committed to gender equality and social justice. We look forward to the possibility of continuing our partnership in the future and deeply appreciate your ongoing efforts."

Breaking Boundaries: Students speak



Dhrupal's Fight For Gender Equality

" I am Dhrupal, a student of Rizvi College, and I have always been proactive in social work, with a particular interest in women's empowerment because of my personal experiences.

The restrictions placed on girls for their 'safety' often confine them to a closed social circle. When I first stepped into the world outside my home, I was astonished to discover just how common gender inequality is. My idealistic views were challenged by the reality that societal structures often overlook women, confining them to home spaces, discouraging them from leadership roles, and silencing their voices. For example, when I joined Akshara as a Peer Guide, I faced backlash from some male peers at college.

My experience as a group leader led to many self-revelations. I learnt to mobilise people and communicate effectively, gaining valuable insights along the way. One of the most important skills I developed was the ability to listen to diverse perspectives, especially when dealing with sensitive issues like gender inequality. The common perception of women's equality is often distorted. Much is made of the significant strides women have made at the workplace, but they still face the burden of domestic responsibilities. Men can rest after work, but women return home to continue household duties. Additionally, workplaces are not accommodating for women, with inadequate facilities like poorly maintained restrooms, and biases in promotion.

These issues motivated me to remain actively engaged in addressing gender inequality and women's empowerment through social actions. I hope to continue my involvement with Akshara, whether as a peer guide or alumna, exploring topics like the LGBTQ+ community, gender issues, and legal citizenship."



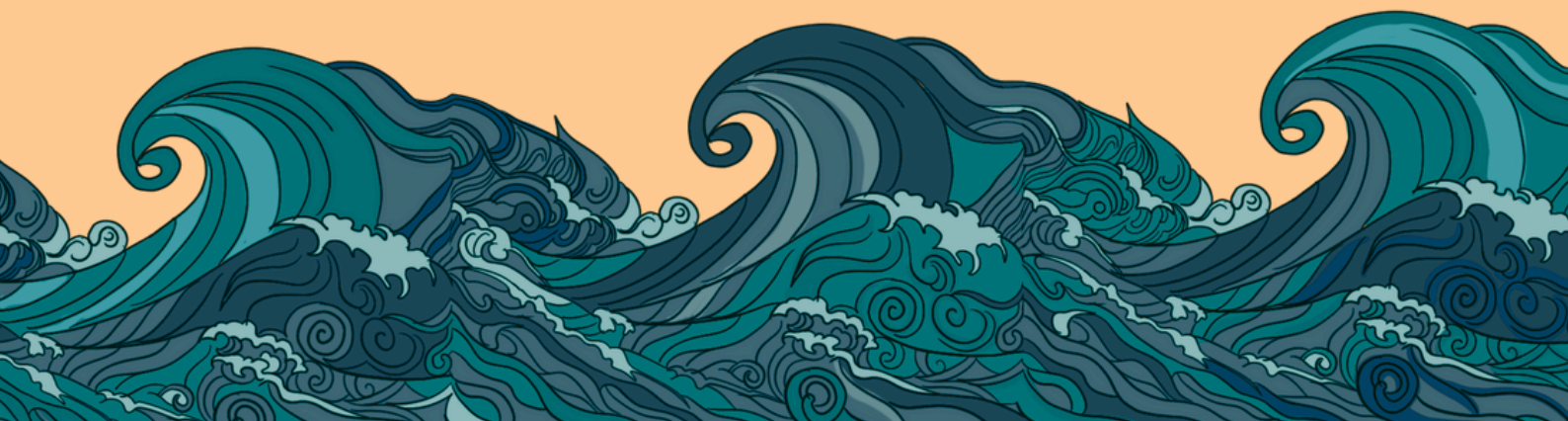
Navigating Leadership and Challenging Gender Norms with Tanish

“ I am Tanish. My interest in social activism led me to Akshara’s Youth for Change Program and become a group leader. One of my main obstacles was mobilising youth for events, it was difficult, but I found that building a strong rapport with volunteers made it simpler. Being a group leader taught me the importance of patience and strategic planning. I learnt not to rely solely on volunteers but to have backup plans to ensure events ran smoothly.

The leadership camp was particularly beneficial, helping me understand Akshara’s goals and how they mobilise youth for change. Through interactions with other leaders during various activities, I realised that what one person sees as a strength can be perceived as a weakness by another. This understanding of complementing each other’s abilities can lead to impressive outcomes.

Gender equality for me means pay parity, as it ultimately empowers women. Awareness of inequality is important, but it does not lead automatically to breaking established norms. I often hear comments from relatives about how I cook while my brother typically does not help in the kitchen. Gender stereotypes can infiltrate family dynamics and relationships with relatives and friends. Implementing gender equality can be complex especially as we are all caught up in stereotypes. During the Yuvak Yuvati Mela, I witnessed an intriguing discussion at my stall - who pays when a boy and girl go out to dine? Men are expected to pay and invariably waiters slide the check toward them. This sparked differing opinions among students—some believed only men should pay, while others argued for splitting the bill, especially if the woman has sufficient funds.

Discussions like these draw me deeper into gender-related issues. I hope to continue my journey of learning and raising awareness through my future involvement with Akshara as an alumna.”



Interactive Workshops: Impacting lives, changing minds

The Gender Rewrite

The Gender Rewrite competition encouraged students to be conscious of the sexist lyrics of popular Bollywood songs which we hum and enjoy. Hearing songs from a feminist perspective reveals the way women are portrayed as commodities or as unthinking persons. Students re-wrote lyrics whilst maintaining their tunes.

Ghar Ka Kaam Sabka Kaam

Ghar Ka Kaam Sabka Kaam was a campaign on sharing of housework. Akshara in collaboration with Azad Foundation and the Non Traditional Livelihood Network launched it as a month-long campaign in which students were asked to share the domestic workload and redefine care work. This campaign aimed to increase men's participation in unpaid domestic work to reduce the pressure on women. The youth participated in the campaign by sharing the pictures challenging gender roles and make **#GharKaKaamSabkaKaam** a reality.



G Fest

G Fest or **Gender Fest** was Akshara Centre's collaborative effort with **ReFrame**, a Delhi-based organisation. It was a transformative three-day festival at Mithibai College which featured a rich array of activities, including an enlightening exhibition, a thought-provoking panel discussion on trans and queer persons, and film screenings addressing themes like violence against women, representation, self-identity, and the societal norms impacting marginalised communities. **470** students from various Akshara-affiliated colleges participated, highlighting the diversity of lived experiences across gender identities.

The Closing Event : Y Talks

The year culminated with Y Talks or Youth Talks, an event meant to advance gender equality awareness and create safe spaces for dialogue amongst youth. It started in an unusual way with students untying the blindfolds around their eyes. This unfolding symbolised an awakening or seeing and understanding gender inequality. It was followed with a vibrant flash mob dance. The event was attended by 712 students from 51 colleges, along with representatives from 6 NGOs.

Participants engaged in discussions, performances, and activities designed to challenge gender stereotypes and promote equality. The star, gender bender event was a lavani dance performed not by a woman but a young man.



Inspiring agency

“Akshara’s Y-Talks stood out for its inclusive platform that brought diverse voices together. With its theme on Body Shaming, the festival provided a space for vibrant discussions and engaging workshops, empowering young minds to confront gender and body image challenges. Its personalised approach ensured that the attendees were not only informed but also inspired to make a difference in their communities. As a student volunteer, Y-Talks was the highlight of the year. From the exhilarating band performances to the exciting prize distribution, it was both informative and incredibly enjoyable. ”

- Sana Dhamaskar, Rizvi College



Making Cities Safe and Inclusive

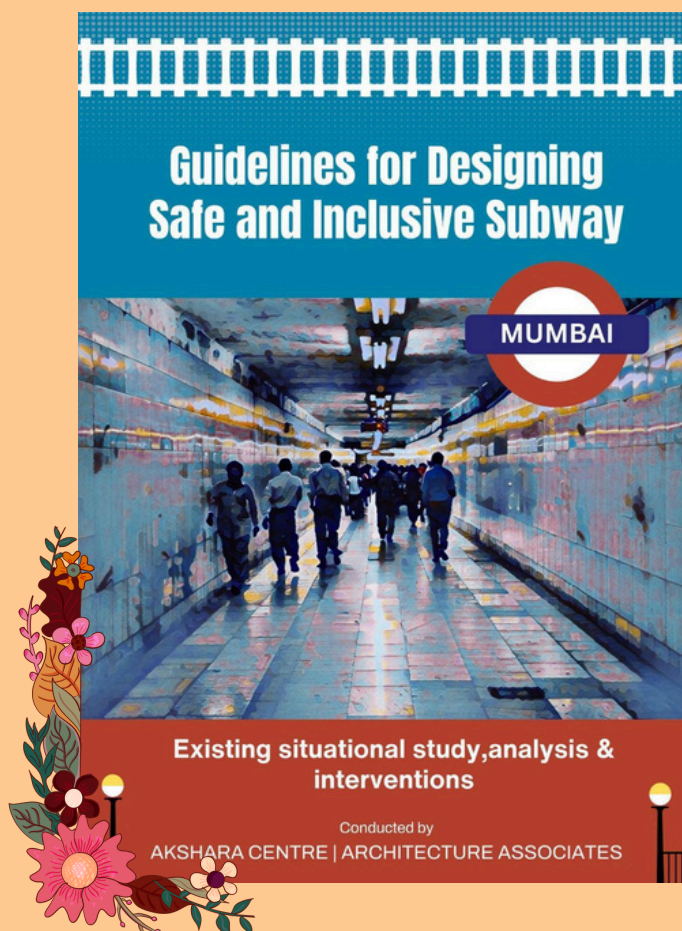
This year, the **Safe City Program** focused on sharpening its tools of inquiry, intervention, education, discourse and dissemination. We strongly believe that building alliances with diverse groups has played a pivotal role in bringing us closer towards our shared goal of gender equality. Our collaborations have been categorised into the following 3 verticals, giving us a broader understanding of the program itself and enhancing the implementation process.



Public Infrastructure and Services

Conventionally designed city spaces usually cater to able-bodied men and thwart women's mobility, access to opportunities, livelihood, and deny them their right to the city. We believe that consistent work at various levels is the key to bringing inclusivity and equality of access to the city. We engaged with the following stakeholders:

- ◆ This year saw the physical manifestation of our long struggle to bring a gender lens to the planning process. India's first **Multi-Purpose Housing for Working Women** was inaugurated on the **8th of March** or International Women's Day. This was made possible by the inclusion of multiple services in the BMC's Development Plan process.
- ◆ Often missing from the planning paradigm is the need for better-lit and more accessible in-between spaces like subways. Safety concerns, ease of use, maintenance, and the presence of security guards and hawkers make this issue multidimensional. Involving a design and gender expert team in this process ensured a comprehensive approach to addressing immediate safety concerns in tandem with the underlying design and planning issues. We collaborated with Architect Associates to conduct a detailed survey and analysis of **14** subways in Mumbai and formulate gender-inclusive guidelines.



- ✦ Akshara Centre is one of the member organisations of BMC's Advisory Committee on Gender. We initiated a documentation process called the '**Framework for Inclusion of Gender Amenities in Development Plan.**' This framework booklet is now available in both English and Marathi.

https://mcmcr.mcgm.gov.in/assets/pdf/MCMCR_ACG_Gender%20Report.pdf

<https://aksharacentre.org/akshararesources/#manuals>

- ✦ We collaborated with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and BMC to create a report on the proposed **Mahila Udyam Kendra (Livelihood Centres for Women)**. This was preceded by a discussion meeting with **42** participants and experts from Maharashtra and other states. The report outlines best practices that cities should adopt to become gender inclusive in planning and practice.
- ✦ A study called the '**Framework for Inclusion of Gender Amenities in Development Plans**' was submitted to the Secretary of Urban Development in Maharashtra with a request to ensure that this is adapted by other cities in the state. This framework has also been submitted to the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) and NITI Aayog.

Public Service Institutions

We believe in engaging with public service institutions like transport, education, Women and Child Development department, and the police for improved prevention and redressal for gender-based violence. The highlight of our engagements was our collaboration with Maharashtra State Transport Service (MSRTC) as a part of our award-winning **Jagah Dikhao** campaign !

<https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/jagahdikhao>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CyutRiGLQUV/?hl=en>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CyulvQblimE/?hl=en>

https://www.instagram.com/p/CysZXk_opBJ/?hl=en

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CypVwO0lfT9/?hl=en>



Our **Jagah Dikhao** campaign in collaboration with the **MSRTC** received a thundering response from **10.5 million** viewers. Three impactful short films highlighting the roles of survivors, co-passengers, and bus conductors in the prevention of sexual harassment, a common experience faced by women, were released at the launch of this campaign. The popularity of the videos demonstrates how awareness campaigns can amplify voices, making them a step towards creating a more inclusive and secure environment for commuters. The **50** percent increase in women commuters from **8 lakh to 18 lakh** following the fare reduction in Maharashtra means **Jagah Dikhao** will resonate with a larger audience.

akshara
towards gender justice

एम.टी.
महाराष्ट्र राज्य परिवहन
कorp. महाराष्ट्र

छेड-छाड करणाऱ्यांना त्यांची
#जगहदिखाओ
त्यांना सर्वांन समोर आणा

तुम्ही छेड-छाडथांबवण्याचा
कधी प्रयत्न केला का?
QR कोड स्कॅन करा, आणि
आपला अनुभव शेअर करा

जगहदिखाओ

standupagainstviolence.org

We have contributed to many multi-stakeholder initiatives at the national level. In collaboration with National Urban Affairs bodies, we evolved a Mainstreaming Women-led Urban Frameworks which was presented in the **G20** and **Urban 20** platforms. Another round table on **Inclusive and Smart Cities**, also drew from our presentation and experiences of working to create feminist cities.

Public Campaigns

Public campaigns cut across all Akshara's programs and are meant to address the public at large or specific groups. These campaigns used a multitude of methods, social media, posters, and messages to reach people. Here are some of our prominent ones:

- ◆ We recompiled the schemes for women and children and **500** copies were distributed for the second consecutive year. This has enabled us to continue our efforts in reaching out to and empowering more women from specific communities to ensure that they have access to valuable information that impacts their lives.
- ◆ Our efforts to include gender in development plans lead us to develop an **Engendering Cities** workshop module which was conducted with Master of Architecture and Urban Design students in three colleges for upcoming planners and urban designers to think of planning from a gendered lens and consequently build gender-inclusive cities.
- ◆ Akshara Centre's initiative to address sexual harassment in public spaces, **Main Hoon Na**, made waves at Dadar Railway station, creating awareness and cultivating a safer and inclusive environment for commuters. Our youth volunteers collaborated with the Railway Protection Force to organise engaging street plays that reached nearly **300 commuters**. To take it a notch further, **12 youth volunteers** interacted with about **100 commuters** to personally address their concerns and provide necessary information. It not only shows personal commitment but the effectiveness of encouraging individuals to actively participate in creating safer and inclusive public spaces.
- ◆ In a survey, **160** youth trained over **4** training sessions, documented experiences of **1072** participants on street sexual harassment. We also ran an online campaign on myths and facts about street sexual harassment on our social media platforms.
- ◆ Our Co-Director Nandita Shah was invited as a panellist by **Centre for Youth Development Activities (CYDA)** on Strategic Planning focusing on Adolescents, Youth, Skilling Gender, Inclusion, Integrated Development as core thematic intervention areas, all aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



Akshara in the Mass Media

Current followers on

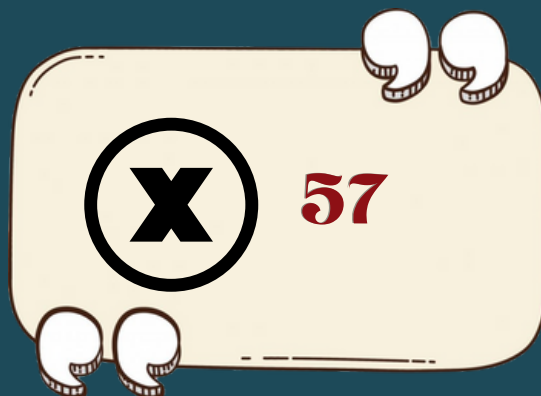


Growing Outreach

Total Reach on Facebook, Instagram and X:

65,49,551

Total follower growth





Youtube

Subscribers

38,000+

Views

10201700+

Website hits

16,96,194

Stand up Against Violence
Website hits

7,57,835

INSTAGRAM:

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6V3VcqpTs2/>

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6c-3_0IHEI/

Akshara's Organisational Chart



Our Board of Trustees

A decorative floral border surrounds the central text area. It features various flowers in shades of pink, purple, orange, and white, along with green leaves and brown stems. The border is positioned in the corners and along the sides of the dark blue text box.

Ms Abha Bhaiya
Ms Anjali Dave
Dr Nandita Gandhi
Dr Nandita Shah
Ms Nina Kapasi
Ms Shimul Javeri Kadri
Ms Sudipta Dhruv

Our Funding Partners

A decorative floral border surrounds the central text area. It features various flowers in shades of pink, purple, orange, and white, along with green leaves and brown stems. The border is positioned in the corners and along the sides of the dark blue background.

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Ford Foundation, India

Dasra, India

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Suzie Bajaj

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Vish Wind Infrastructure LLP

Vivek Ahuja



Our Staff

At Akshara we believe that nurturing and supporting young minds also means spending time on ourselves to learn new skills. Team-building exercises and specific skills like Excel were focused on this year



Our Finances

Front For Rapid Economic Advancement of India/Akshara Centre

Abridged Financial Statements for the Year 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024

BALANCE-SHEET AS ON 31st MARCH, 2024

FUNDS & LIABILITIES	AMOUNT IN INR		ASSETS	AMOUNT IN INR
Trust Fund/Corpus Fund	44,88,902		Immovable Properties	11,55,284
Other Earmarked Funds	2,48,24,452		Movable Properties	3,77,163
Project Balance Unspent Amount	58,94,228		Investments	5,96,27,000
Liabilities and Provisions	9,11,365		Income Receivable	1,11,057
Income & Expenditure Account	2,86,08,009		Deposits & Advances	20,85,685
			Cash & Balance with Banks	13,70,767
Total Amount	6,47,26,956		Total Amount	6,47,26,956

Our Finances

Income and Expenditure Statement for the Year 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024			
EXPENDITURE	AMOUNT IN INR	INCOME	AMOUNT IN INR
To Establishment Expenses	12,476	By Interest	32,12,570
To Public Trust Administration Fund	38,082	By Donation	30,90,118
To Expenses on Object of the Trust	6,62,974	By Rent Received	2,70,000
To Expenses Towards Scholarship	10,11,095	By Income from other sources	7,606
To Depreciation	7,716		
To Loss on Sale of Fixed Assets	5,952		
To Interest transferred to respective funds	8,92,145		
To Donations transferred to respective funds	18,29,023		
To Surplus of Income over Expenditure carried to Balance Sheet	21,20,831		
Total Amount	65,80,294	Total Amount	65,80,294

