

School of Hope: Exploring Vidhya Kumbh Initiative for educating children of sanitation workers in Maha Kumbh Mela 2025

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Abstract: The present paper explores the Vidhya Kumbh primary schools designed specifically for children of sanitation workers which contributed to the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 held in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. The initiative was the hope for parents and their children that provided the uninterrupted education to children of sanitation workers during Maha Kumbh. Vidhya Kumbh schools were opened in those sectors of Maha Kumbh where the population of sanitation workers was high. There were seven schools in different sectors of Maha Kumbh. Out of seven, three schools were selected in the study based on the enrollment of children and feasibility to access the schools in between the massive crowd of Maha Kumbh. The paper explores the innovative teaching practices and pedagogies utilized in the Vidhya Kumbh primary schools to provide quality education to children of sanitation workers. Subsequently, it discusses the perspective of teachers and parents about the Vidhyakumbh schools. Findings suggest that interim schools like Vidhya Kumbh proved as an essential educative initiative to facilitate learning in the temporary situations that interrupt formal education of children. However, it argues that such short term initiative though impactful need to transit into long term commitment of educational inclusion of children of sanitation worker.

Keywords: Vidhya Kumbh, primary education, Maha Kumbh, Pedagogies

Introduction: Sanitation workers are the most vulnerable section of the society in India. It is because of the stigma associated with the nature of their work. This

stigma which is perpetrated on sanitation workers (*safai karamcharis*) also extends to their children (Walters, 2019). Children of sanitation workers of age 6 to 14 face various health issues including exposure to hazardous substances, respiratory diseases, skin infections and chronic malnutrition and have no access to formal education (Care India, 2002). Poverty, stigma associated with the nature of work and hazardous living conditions severely impact their standard of living, access to education and employment opportunities leading to their marginalisation from the mainstream society. Education which is a basic right of every child in India, is the only tool for their social inclusion and empowerment. However, accessibility to quality education for children of sanitation workers remains an aspiration for them. In a study conducted on livelihood and educational status of sanitation workers, it was found that they want their children to pursue higher education despite the hardships they face in their life. The unhygienic and pathetic living conditions, poverty, exposure to harmful diseases and lack of accessibility to education has severely impacted their livelihood. More than 25% of their income is spent on medical expenses (Unnithan, 2012). Over the last ten to eleven years in India, sanitation has been the key focus of the government programmes. The sanitation workers have played a major role in achieving the objectives of various initiatives on sanitation led by the government. In a similar way, sanitation workers have made a substantial contribution in maintaining cleanliness and hygiene during the Maha Kumbh, 2025. Around 15,000 sanitation workers were engaged by the Prayagraj mela authority to maintain cleanliness managing about 1.5 lakh toilets and urinals in Maha Kumbh (Yuman, 2025). Further, the Guinness World Record was set by 300 sanitation workers, whose dedicated efforts played a pivotal role in large scale river cleaning event during the Maha Kumbh. The social inequalities persist which is reflected in the roles assigned to the sanitation workers in the Maha Kumbh. However, the political gesture of inclusion by the state on providing primary education to the children of sanitation workers is appreciable, as the religious space was turned to be a site for children to engage in meaningful learning. The present study explores the role of initiative like Vidhya Kumbh primary schools in providing education to the marginalised communities in temporary settlements. Subsequently, it discusses the perception of stakeholders about primary schools for the children of sanitation workers in the Maha Kumbh.

The paper critically analyses the initiative and argues to transit these short-term initiatives into long term commitments to provide quality education to children of sanitation workers without any discrimination.

Objectives: The objectives of the study were:

1. to explore the innovative practices and pedagogies of Vidhya Kumbh primary schools.
2. to gain insight into the perspective of teachers about Vidhya Kumbh primary schools.
3. to study the perspectives of parents (sanitation workers) of the children studying in the Vidhya Kumbh primary schools.

Methodology: The study employed qualitative case study methodology to explore the teaching pedagogies and practices encompassed in Vidhya Kumbh primary schools designed to teach the children of sanitation workers in Maha Kumbh 2025. Out of seven Vidhya Kumbh primary schools opened in different sectors including sector 1, sector 2, sector 3, sector 7, sector 9, sector 19, and sector 26, three schools were selected based on enrollment of children and the feasibility to access the schools in massive crowd of Maha Kumbh, 2025. Semi structured interview schedules were used to collect in depth data from teachers and parents to gain insight into their perspectives about the Vidhya Kumbh Primary schools. Furthermore, classroom observations were conducted to explore the pedagogical approaches and practices for teaching children enrolled in the Vidhya Kumbh schools.

Findings:

Vidhya Kumbh primary schools were interim initiative launched by the Education department of Uttar Pradesh state government to support the education of children of sanitation workers engaged in Maha Kumbh, 2025. It is estimated that 15000 sanitation workers were deployed in the Maha Kumbh mela event to ensure cleanliness and order. The schools were incredible in providing the quality education to the children enrolled in it. The present study covered three schools that were opened in sector 1, sector 2 and sector 7 of the Maha Kumbh mela based on the enrollment of children and accessibility to the schools in between the

massive crowd of mela. The aim of the school was to provide the children of sanitation workers to access the foundational learning, life skills building activities and innovative teaching learning methods. It helped them to engage in learning process in and around the Maha Kumbh 2025 event. The school situated in sector 2 served as a model school, following which similar schools were subsequently established in other sectors for educating children of sanitation workers.

During the school observations, it was found that the school has good infrastructure with well-developed technological interventions. The key highlights of the school were smart classrooms, innovative teaching learning material, free education, vision of inclusivity, certified education, medical facilities and proper toilet facilities.

Table No. 1: Details of the number of teachers, enrolled students and facilities in

S. No.	Location of Vidhya Kumbh schools	Number of teachers	Number of students enrolled	Infrastructure facilities
1.	Sector 1 (started on 13 November 2024)	6	140	2 classrooms, 1 staffroom, washroom for faculty, common washroom for students, drinking water facilities, playground, general medicines were available
2.	Sector 2 (started on 7 December 2024)	7	270	Principal room, staffroom, 5 classrooms, Anganwadi centre, ICT room, library, washroom for faculty, separate washroom for girls and boys, drinking water facilities, Playground, medical room (1 doctor and 2 ward boys).
3.	Sector 7 (started on 7 January 2025)	6	60	Staffroom, 5 Classrooms, washroom for faculty, common washroom for students, playground, general medicines were available.

the school.

Out of the three schools, the school located in sector 2 was of main attraction because of its' remarkable infrastructure including separate classrooms for class I to V and for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). There were three teachers appointed especially for Anganwadi at Vidhya Kumbh school located in sector 2. There was one staffroom, ICT room, separate washrooms for girls and boys, playground and medical room.

Pedagogical approaches and practices in Vidhya Kumbh Schools

Vidhya Kumbh primary schools were unique as it gave the children a platform to continue their education and build relationships with peers coming from diverse regional backgrounds. The school engaged children in various curricular and co-curricular activities during the Maha Kumbh mela. The key highlights of the approaches of teaching and practices employed in the Vidhya Kumbh primary schools were as follows:



Picture 1: Children listening story from a teacher in Vidhya Kumbh School located in sector 2 of Maha Kumbh 2025.



Picture 2: Children playing a game reusing empty water bottles in the school located in sector 7



Picture 3: Field visit to Maha Kumbh mela organized by Sector 7 school

A) **Integration of technology**

Majority of the teachers found Vidhya Kumbh school an innovative initiative which has given them opportunity to work in the school located in between the massive crowd of Maha Kumbh. According to them, technological infrastructure in Vidhya Kumbh schools was commendable with the integration of smart classrooms. Utilization of Information and communication technology helped to gain the attention of the children and encouraged them to attend the schools

regularly. One of the teachers working in sector 2 school stated that educational videos played an important part in attracting the children to get enrolled in the schools. She told, “...initially children did not come to school but when they realized that educational videos are played in schools to teach children, they started attending the school almost on regular basis”. While school observation, it was found that classrooms were equipped with smart boards and included interactive videos and digital learning resources to engage the children in teaching learning process.

B) Inclusivity

According to the teachers, Vidhya Kumbh initiative encouraged children of temporary settlements to carry on their education. They accepted that teaching children from diverse backgrounds within limited period was challenging, however, it was a unique experience. The children who came to schools were mostly from Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Majority of the teachers believed that the initiative served as site to gain insights into the diverse culture through children’s perspectives from varied regional backgrounds. They accepted that catering the learning needs of children from diverse backgrounds in the limited period of time was challenging, however, it helped them to understand the importance of considering language differences and cultural context of the learners in the classrooms while teaching. One of the teachers stated that “विद्या कुंभ स्कूल जैसे उपक्रम समानता और अनिवार्य शिक्षा के कानून के प्रति प्रतिबद्ध कर रहा है” (Initiatives like Vidya Kumbh School are committed to the law of equality and compulsory education). It reflects the significance of the vision of inclusion and equal opportunities in the education system which is enshrined in our constitution.

C) Integration of arts and music in education

It was found during classroom observations that teachers were integrating arts and music while teaching basic life skills, numeracy and poems to the students. For example, students along with a teacher in sector 1 school were singing a poem and acting simultaneously about significance of cleanliness and hygiene. The song was “kagaz ke tukde dekho zameen per pade hain, kitna ganda lagta hai, inko uthaker dustbin me daal do, kitna achha lagta hai”. The students were enjoying singing poems with the teacher. The pedagogy used to teach children was based on joyful learning.

D) Direct experiences to Kumbh mela

Children were taken for visits to various stalls and exhibitions of the Kumbh mela to orient them with Maha Kumbh mela, culture of Uttar Pradesh and religious significance of Triveni Sangam. During the classroom observations in Sector 1, it was noted that teachers organised visits to Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) Mandapam and U.P. Sanskritik Kendra for children enrolled in the Vidhya Kumbh schools. It shows the incorporation of direct experiences to spaces for children to understand the tradition and cultural significance of Maha Kumbh mela and the state in which it was situated.

E) Play based learning

Games were systematically organised to foster a sense of healthy competition, coordination, and collective joy. Significantly, these activities were conducted using cost-effective and readily available resources, such as empty water bottles. Teachers demonstrated complete involvement in the teaching-learning process, ensuring that instructions were explicit and game demonstrations were conducted effectively to aid student understanding.

Furthermore, music and games were creatively integrated. For example, while students sang the popular children's song "*Lakdi ki Kathi, Kathi per ghoda*" and moved in a circle, the activity was structured so that when the music stopped, a student would attempt to pick up a piece of cloth placed at the centre. The child who successfully picked the cloth was declared the winner. Such activities were joyful and engaging which also supported the development of motor skills, coordination, and sense of fair play.

The schools emphasized on both curricular and co-curricular activities for the holistic learning. Students were provided with school uniforms and those who enrolled in later stage were allowed to come in the school in their own clothing. The school infrastructure was well equipped with proper desks, spacious classrooms, projectors, Teaching learning materials (TLM), white board and other stationery materials. TLM included both the readymade resources and the instructional material created by the teachers. It covered a range of foundational concepts taught in the classrooms such as identification of body parts, recitation of poems, understanding of different seasons, basic arithmetic operations (addition

and subtraction), recognition of shapes, and the concept of time, including months, weeks, hours, minutes, and seconds. The playground in the schools was spacious providing plentiful opportunity for children to perform physical and recreational activities. Morning assembly formed an integral part of the school routine. The aim of the practice was to instil values of discipline, order, and community participation among students.

Experiences of teachers of Vidhya Kumbh primary school initiative

Seventeen teachers working in the Vidhya Kumbh primary schools were interviewed to study their perception about the initiative to teach children of sanitation workers in Maha Kumbh 2025. Out of 17 teachers, 4 were male and 13 were female with the experience of more than five years in teaching profession. Sixteen teachers who participated in the initiative were working in the government schools and one teacher was an employee of an agency working in the field of teaching. It was the first experience for majority of the teachers working for the initiative like Vidhya Kumbh which was opened temporarily for providing uninterrupted education to the children of sanitation workers during the Maha Kumbh mela. All the teachers working in the Vidhya Kumbh primary schools came to know about the initiative from official government communication. For majority of the teachers, the motivation factor to engage with the initiative was social responsibility and interest to work for the children of marginalized section of the society.

All the teachers interviewed appreciated the initiative of Vidhya Kumbh schools that provided free primary education to the children of sanitation workers. Many of them stated that initially it appeared to be a challenging task as children enrolled in the schools were from varied regions with language differences. However, teachers accepted that the initiative helped them to develop sensitivity towards language differences in classrooms. According to them, it was the space where they interacted with children from varied backgrounds and got the opportunity to get familiar with different languages and expressions. Teachers stated their contentment after seeing the tremendous satisfaction among children and especially their parents about the endeavor that gave the attention towards education for their children in Maha Kumbh.

Teachers, especially working in the school situated at sector 2 stated that children were reluctant to attend the schools in the beginning, however, they came on regular basis as the days passed and did not want to leave the school premises even after school is over. Children wanted to be involved in the learning process. Teachers mentioned that due to adverse environment around them many children were engaged in deviant behaviour such as gambling, using abusive language and consuming gutka. The school served as a site for children to engage in meaningful educational activities and learning. A drastic change in the behaviour of children was observed by the teachers. According to them, children were able to acquire the skill of speaking in Hindi and English to communicate in the classroom. One of the teachers stated “...yha aaker bachho ne pani peene ya sochalaye jane ke liye anumati ki prasangikita ke bare me seekha.”

Overall teachers were contented with the unique experience of teaching children from varied regional, language and cultural background. They suggested that every teacher must participate in such kind of initiatives as it teaches a teacher about understanding child behaviour and importance of modifying teaching strategies as per the need of a child and the context.

Majority of the teachers suggested that there should be the provision of midday meals even in the school initiatives for temporary settlements. They believed it would encourage the children to stay in the schools during school time. As there was no provision for midday meals, children used to go back to their home to have lunch and many times they did not come back. Further, teachers stated that there is dire need to create awareness about the significance of education among parents for their children.

3.1 Perception of parents about Vidhya Kumbh primary schools

Total eighteen parents were interviewed to study their perception about the school initiative. Out of eighteen, twelve were female and six were male. Fifteen were working as cleaners at Maha Kumbh mela, two were involved in animal carcass removal from Ganga River and one was residing at temporary settlement for sanitation workers. Majority of the parents communicated about the Vidhya Kumbh primary school initiatives from the teachers appointed in the school. Teachers went to the settlement of sanitation workers to disseminate the information about the Vidhya Kumbh initiative and encouraged children to join the

school. The other sources of information about the initiative were parents of other children who were enrolled in the school and self. Most parents expressed their satisfaction with the initiative as they believed it has facilitated their children's engagement in meaningful learning experiences during Maha Kumbh. They expressed concerns about leaving their kids alone at home while they went to work. However, this concern was alleviated with the establishment of the Vidhya Kumbh schools during the Maha Kumbh, as children were engaged in school activities. The strict supervision of teachers who ensured that the children did not wander around the mela gave parents a sense of reassurance about safety and security concerns about their children. Therefore, they perceived the initiative as not only promoting their children's education but also ensuring their safety and well-being.

Parents reported that the academic performance and behaviour of their children have improved because of the initiative. Many also stated that Vidhya Kumbh initiative provided their children to attend the formal school for the first time as they could not secure admission in schools due to the lack of Aadhaar card as an identity proof. Among the parents interviewed, two fathers with educational backgrounds up to Grade V and Grade VIII emphasised the need for a provision of mid-day meals and expressed dissatisfaction with the practice of combined classes. Further, one mother reported that her child had been active and high performing in his previous school, such progress was not evident in the Vidhya Kumbh school. Parents suggested that apart from teaching, games such as football, cricket etc can be introduced to keep children engaged and motivated. They also recommended that while this initial initiative appropriately focused on primary-level students, future efforts should consider including higher classes in the next Kumbh.

Conclusion:

Vidhya Kumbh schools were incredible step towards making the education inclusive and accessible for children of sanitation workers. For many children, it was their first experience to learn in the formal settings. The schools served as spaces for them to actively engage in the meaningful learning and helped them to gain confidence and learn self-expression. Teachers were contented to participate in the initiative as it gave them an opportunity to delve into the lives of children coming from marginalised and diverse cultural backgrounds. Parents expressed

their satisfaction with Vidhya Kumbh schools which supported the uninterrupted education and engaged their children in constructive learning. Many parents feel motivated to continue further education of their children. The short-term initiatives like Vidhya Kumbh were impactful and motivated children to continue education at their native places. However, it was unable to address the structural and attitudinal barriers these children face in mainstream schooling. Due to the lack of proof of identification, such as Aadhaar cards which are prerequisites for school admission in their native places, many children were unable to get enrolled in schools. Unless these practical challenges are systematically addressed, the initiative risks being a one-time opportunity rather than a gateway to sustained educational inclusion. Therefore, follow-up is utmost important to allow the benefit of such initiatives to extend well beyond their immediate context. There is a need of coordination with local schools, creation of reliable identification documents and tracking children after event addressing the systemic barriers for real inclusion of children of sanitation workers. Overall, the initiative raised the awareness about importance of education and helped to understand the challenges faced by sanitation workers for educating their children serving both a meaningful intervention and a reminder. The promise of such initiatives can only be realised if children of sanitation workers are included effectively in the mainstream education system.

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