

Birchall Prize 2023

Akshay Kotibhaskar (D)

The journey of Saathi has been one of the most enriching experiences of my life. It not only taught me valuable lessons about initiative and personal growth but also deepened my understanding of the importance of giving back to the community. Rather than a simple one-time donation, my sister and I chose to start a for (small) profit business so that our impact could be long-term, sustainable, and self-sufficient. We focused our efforts on the issue of period poverty – a generally unheard of and greatly stigmatized issue of menstruation and the lack of access and education surrounding menstrual products.

This cause is extremely close to my heart, considering that the only reason I was aware of it in the first place is due to my family. I possess an Indian heritage that leads back to a small remote ancestral village named Bhirwadi, located in the rural region of Maharashtra. In 2022, my parents decided that it would be an invaluable experience for my sibling and I to visit our roots. They wanted us to gain an appreciation of where our lineage originated from and remind us of how grateful we ought to be for what we perceive as the most basic and simple amenities in our daily lives.

One such amenity for women is access to menstrual hygiene products. Admittedly, I was rather uncomfortable discussing the topic at first, and so I must give significant credit to my sister, for initially recognising the problem and thereafter helping me break through the mould. Through the conversations she had with some of the girls her age, during our trip, we discovered that not only was affording menstrual products an extreme challenge, but it was also a major cause of disease, depression, and a severe lack of education across the region. This was a deeply disturbing revelation to us, as young adults, and our parents, and I knew at once that something had to be done.

Naturally, I delved deeper into this problem by conducting online and in-person research, and my findings only horrified me further. “Period poverty” is the name given to the global lack of menstrual products that faces, at the very least, 500 million women each year – as estimated by the World Bank.¹ It has impaired or even completely denied roughly 25% of girls worldwide their right to an education, and next year this figure is expected to rise dramatically to almost 40%, a cycle that merely prolongs their plight across generations.²

However, what is arguably just as adversely impactful is our society’s negligence in the matter. We maintain a state of total unawareness of the issue that unfortunately affects the vast majority of the global population, with males in particular having little to no knowledge of the matter whatsoever, due in part to widespread misinformation (or indeed willing ignorance), but also as a result of the ill-conceived notions of social indignity surrounding the topic. In fact, period poverty is prevalent even in the UK; more than 137,700 girls missed school last year because they couldn't afford or access period products, and 59% of them chose to lie or use alternative excuses to miss school such as faking colds or headaches as they felt these reasons were more believable and “acceptable”.³

And yet somehow period poverty has yet to reach the ears of most UK residents.

With sizable contributions from friends and family, my sister and I began to formulate a plan during 2023. By March, we had come up with our solution: Saathi. A Hindi word that

¹ (The World Bank, n.d.)

² (Citron Hygiene, n.d.)

³ (Citron Hygiene, n.d.)

translates to “companion,” we decided to create a business that would operate with a buy-one-give-one policy while maintaining high levels of sustainability. Our purpose was to manufacture reusable period underwear that was cost-effective, superior to others on the market, and educational, while being capable of destigmatizing the concept, and eventually helping us support as many girls in need as we could.

Despite appearing an arduous task at first, we received swells of support, and eventually, after trialling through six manufacturers, we selected one which had the cheapest possible production costs that was still environmentally friendly (containing 95% bamboo fibre) and had a high-quality and absorbency rate. We even managed to secure partnerships with a relevant NGO, the KCS Foundation, focused on women empowerment, and the generous DHL corporation in order to aid us with the distribution process. Over the course of several months, we proved the success of our business by selling and thus donating 5,000 period underwear in Uganda, Burkina Faso, and India – the latter of which I directly participated in by donating over 1,500 underwear personally to adolescent girls across three schools in the remote district of Samastipur in the summer of 2023.

In truth, while I felt extremely humbled throughout the experience, I was very apprehensive about the donations, however, any such inconsequential fears were almost instantly replaced by shock and empathy by the time we arrived at the first of the villages we intended to distribute Saathi products to.

One of the first things I noticed that the immediate response from almost everyone was to treat the topic of menstruation as taboo, something that was – while disheartening – somewhat expected. What I hadn't anticipated was learning about the existence of period huts. Period huts are communal areas the size of small garden sheds where women are essentially herded into every month and locked away while enduring their periods, with nothing more than holes in the ground and filthy rags to use throughout the experience. Witnessing this firsthand, I was instantly overcome with a sense of heartbreak and urgency.

These young girls, only marginally different in age to my sister and I, were subjected to such inhumane conditions simply because of a natural process. The fear and shame ingrained in them were palpable; most revealed that they dreaded their monthly cycles, not just because of the physical discomfort, but because it meant isolation, humiliation, and the risk of infection from unsanitary rags. Hearing their story was undoubtedly a turning point for me; I realized just how significant and impactful Saathi could be for these girls.

As we distributed Saathi products, the girls' reactions were nothing short of transformative. We answered their questions, dispelled myths, and, most importantly, spoke to them without discomfort or shame. We saw the joy and relief on their faces as they understood that they now had a safe, clean, and dignified solution for their menstrual needs.

This experience was a profound reminder of the power of empathy and compassion. It highlighted the dire need for education and resources in areas often overlooked by mainstream initiatives. The Saathi philosophy is rooted in compassion, education, and sustainability. We stand for a world where periods are treated as a natural part of life, where menstrual hygiene is a fundamental right, and where each of us takes responsibility for the well-being of the environment. This was a perfect example of how we could change and shape lives, discarding stereotypical norms and becoming more accepting as a culture.

Seeing the tangible impact of Saathi on these girls' lives was the most emotionally rewarding part of this journey. It affirmed our belief that small actions, driven by empathy and a desire to make a difference, can create significant change. It wasn't just about providing a product; it was about restoring dignity, ensuring health, and empowering these girls to pursue their dreams without the barriers imposed by period poverty.

Most recently, in order to develop and expand our business and thereby reach out and help even more impoverished women, my sister and I decided to take part in the Diamond Challenge hosted by the University of Delaware. Once we made it to the finals, in April just before my GCSEs began, we were invited to the US in order to pitch the idea personally in the Social Innovation track. After three gruelling days of competition, we ended up winning a total of \$4,000 by placing third, which we were delighted about, and immediately reinvested into Saathi.

Periods are a natural and essential aspect of a woman's life. There should be no stigma attached to it. Every girl has a right to education, menstrual hygiene, and ensuring her physical and emotional well-being. I firmly believe that a lack of menstrual products or having a stigma attached to periods should not be the reason she is denied an education, an empowered mindset, or an enriched life. Through Saathi, we aim to create a world where menstrual hygiene is accessible to all, where periods are not a source of shame, and where every girl can reach her full potential. My experiences thus far have been a testament to the power of compassion, determination, and the belief that even small actions can create significant change.

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