



मेरा mangar

हमारो DHAUN हमारो

PARTICIPATORY HABITAT STUDY PROGRAM

Nurturing Ecological Kinship

FINAL REPORT – K2A GRANT PERIOD 2024-2025



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Participatory Habitat Study and Environmental Education and awareness in peri-urban villages of Aravalli

This research aims to understand sustainable living by engaging children and youth in participatory habitat studies in Mangar and Dhauj villages. It involves uncovering and documenting community knowledge and cultural practices using tools like mental maps, spatial mapping, community stories, concept maps, and art. The methodology includes participatory action research with training and engagement of local teachers and students, data collection through workshops and nature walks, and visual and oral documentation of ecological resources.

The expected outputs are village-specific habitat magazines, bite-sized videos or oral blogs, training modules for teachers, and skill development programs for students, enhancing biodiversity literacy, natural history knowledge, documentation practices, and critical and creative thinking.

The term of K2A grant was from 30/06/2024 to 30/06/2025



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Nurturing Ecological Kinship: Sehreeti's Participatory Habitat Study in the Aravallis

Sehreeti's Participatory Habitat Study is a place-based initiative working with peri-urban communities in the **Aravalli hills**, specifically in the villages of **Mangar** and **Dhauj** in Faridabad district, Haryana. These villages lie along the edge of the expanding Gurgaon urban agglomeration and are situated in one of the oldest fold mountain ranges in the world—the **Aravallis**, which play a critical role in regulating the microclimate, groundwater recharge, and biodiversity of the region.

Once blanketed in native deciduous forests and interspersed with sacred groves or *banis*, the **Aravallis were historically sustained through community stewardship and customary practices of commons management**. Villages like Mangar and Dhauj are repositories of this ecological memory. However, over the last two decades, these landscapes have come under increasing threat from **real estate pressures, land enclosures, monoculture plantations, and infrastructural development**, leading to fragmentation of habitats and the erasure of local knowledge systems.

Mangar is known for the **Mangar Bani**, a sacred grove believed to be protected by a local sage, Gudariya Baba. It is one of the last remaining patches of native forest in the region and home to rich biodiversity, including the Dhau tree (*Anogeissus pendula*), Indian rock python, golden jackals, and seasonal grasslands. The grove has been preserved due to strong oral traditions, but is now under stress due to encroachment and lack of formal protection.

Dhauj, located a little further south, is a larger village historically reliant on **hill farming, animal husbandry, and forest-based resources**. It lies near the Dhauj jheel (a seasonal water body), now threatened by mining and topographical changes. While forest cover here has degraded significantly, the cultural memory of the Aravalli landscape remains—through stories, practices, and shared landmarks.



To respond to these shifting ecological relationships, **Sehreeti began its participatory work in Mangar in 2022**, and scaled up in **Dhauj in 2024 with support from the K2A grant**. The approach recognises the **settlement as a habitat**, where natural and built environments, livelihoods, practices, and memories are intertwined. It engages **children and youth**—who often lack structured opportunities to relate to their immediate environment—as active learners and potential stewards of the commons.

Through **nature walks, seasonal observation, memory-mapping, storytelling, art-based explorations, and field documentation**, the study enables young participants to observe, document, and reflect on the layered ecological, cultural, and infrastructural dimensions of their habitat. The goal is to **rebuild ecological kinship**—a sense of care, reciprocity, and emotional connection with the land.

In a powerful act of ownership and expression, the children and youth themselves gave the initiative its local names—**"Mera Mangar"** and **"Humaro Dhauj"**—reflecting a deepening sense of identity, belonging, and personal connection to their settlements. These names signify that the understanding of their habitat is not externally imposed but **emerges from within—rooted in their lived experience and collective memory**. Sehreeti believes that **once children and youth observe and understand their environment, they begin to relate to it**—not as static geography but as a living, changing system. This lays the foundation for long-term custodianship, especially critical in contexts where formal planning overlooks commons and community-led stewardship.

In doing so, the Participatory Habitat Study seeks to **strengthen intergenerational ecological knowledge**, support community reflection, and offer tools for reimagining futures that are not severed from the ecological past—but deeply informed by it.



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मेरा mangar

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*The program fosters
a sense of belonging and identity
in local youth and community by
deepening their understanding
of the
settlement, biodiversity, culture, festivals,
food, and Indigenous traditions*

Aligns with



Our approach draws from the root meaning of the word **“Habitat”**, which originates from the Latin verb *habitare*—“to inhabit” or “to live in.” *Habitare* itself stems from *habere*, meaning “to have” or “to hold,” evoking a sense of **belonging, possession, and connection** to a place.

In understanding a settlement as a habitat, we explore it as more than just a physical space—it is a living, layered system of **relationships between people, land, nature, culture, and memory**. Through the Participatory Habitat Study, we work with children and youth to unlayer the habitat of **Mangar and Dhauj** across interlinked dimensions: **native flora and fauna, traditional food practices, cultural traditions, built structures and spaces, and the ecological changes impacting harmony and ways of life**. These explorations are guided by essential, open-ended questions:

क्या है... कहाँ है... कैसा है... क्यों है... कब है... कैसे है? /

What is it? Where is it? What is it like? Why is it so? When does it occur? How does it work?—encouraging curiosity, critical reflection, and a deepening understanding of their home as an ecological and cultural continuum.

“Habitat” comes from the Latin verb “habitare”, meaning **“to inhabit” or “to live in.”**

Habitare itself is derived from “habere”, meaning “to have” or “to hold,” emphasizing a sense of possession or **connection to a place**.

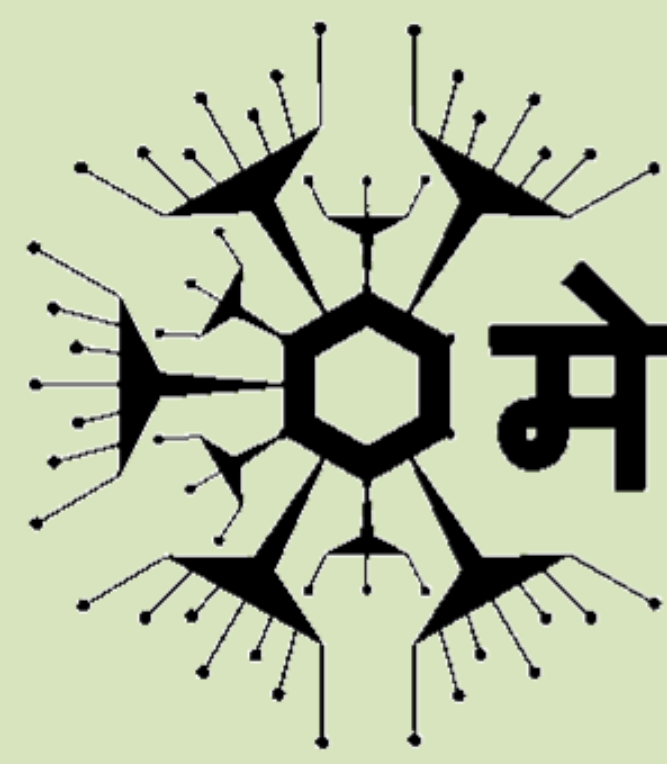
**“It’s not just land that is broken,
but more importantly,
our relationship to land.”**

*Robin Wall Kimmerer,
Braiding Sweetgrass*



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*Native
Flora*



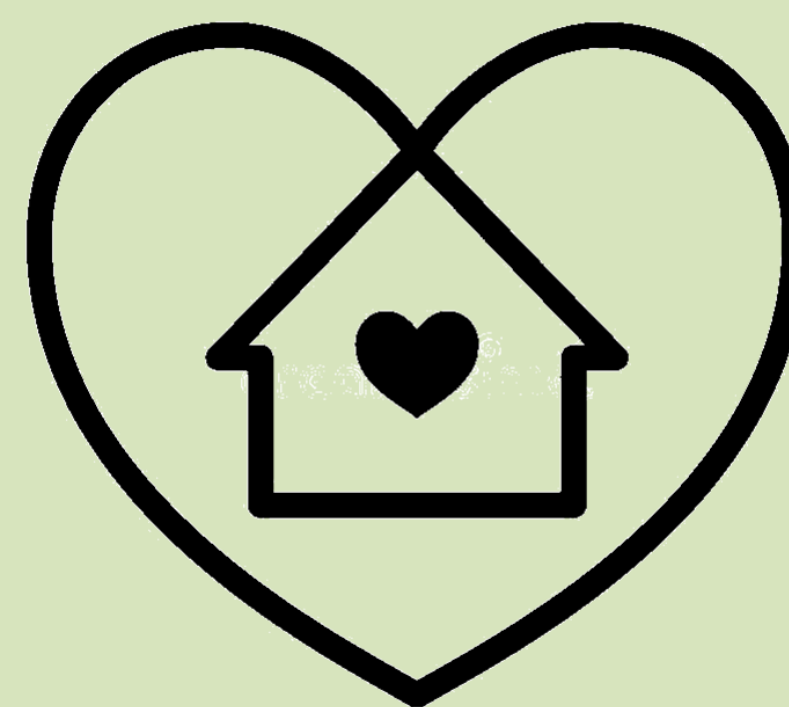
*Native
Fauna*



*Traditional
Food
Practices*



*Cultural
Practices*



*Buildings,
Spaces &
Structures*



*Changes
impacting
Ecological
Harmony &
Way of Life*



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- **Children and youth are the true custodians of traditional knowledge of their habitat - natural, cultural, and built.**
- **Traditional knowledge thrives *through practice*, not formal procedures - passed on through real-life application.**
- **Sehreeti's *participatory approach* uncovers community knowledge by exploring the built, cultural and natural environment.**
- **Tools like mental maps, spatial mapping, stories, and art help document and represent, understand these local practices.**



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PARTICIPATORY HABITAT STUDY PROGRAM

क्या है...कहां है...कैसा है...क्यूं हैं?
What...Where...When..How...
Why? ...of Mangar & Dhaaj

Nurturing Ecological Kinship



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Partnership and Approach

Sehreeti partnered with **Laksh Foundation**, a local NGO that runs a **tuition centre in Dhauj village**, engaging local youth as teachers. This partnership formed the foundation of the program. Sehreeti worked closely with Laksh's tutors and approximately **30 children** (girls and boys) from Dhauj to design and deliver lessons on alternate Saturdays. The tuition centre served as a **safe, inclusive space** for children—especially girls—to learn, reflect, and express freely in an otherwise **conservative and predominantly Muslim** settlement, where **gendered access to public learning spaces is often limited**.

Sehreeti also conducted **two intensive Training of Trainers (ToT) sessions** with the teachers from Laksh Foundation, equipping them with tools and pedagogies to carry forward lessons in biodiversity, cultural history, and participatory mapping.



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Activities Conducted

The participatory habitat study unfolded through a series of structured and creative activities conducted over six months. These included:

a. Mapping and Memory Exercises

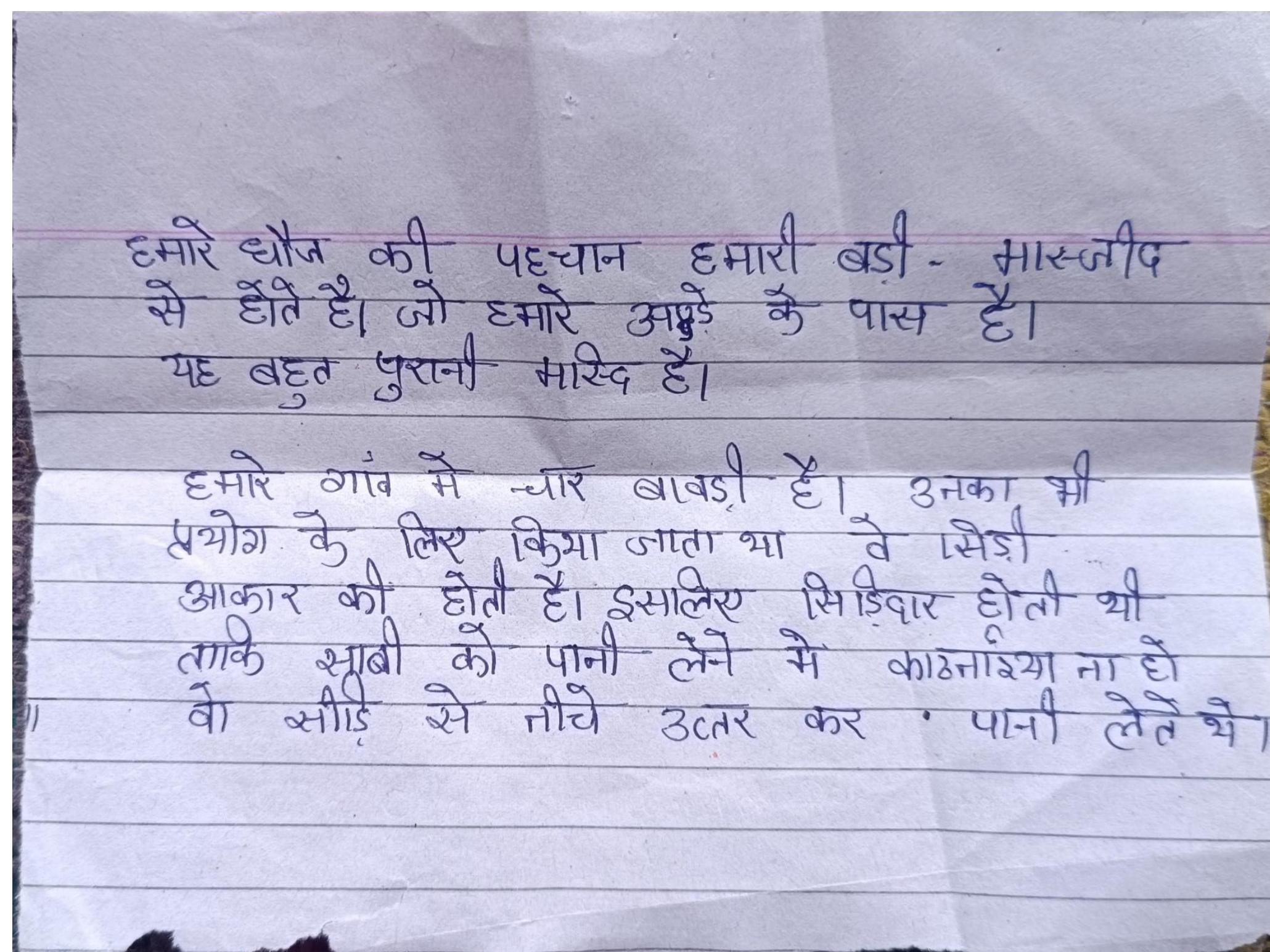
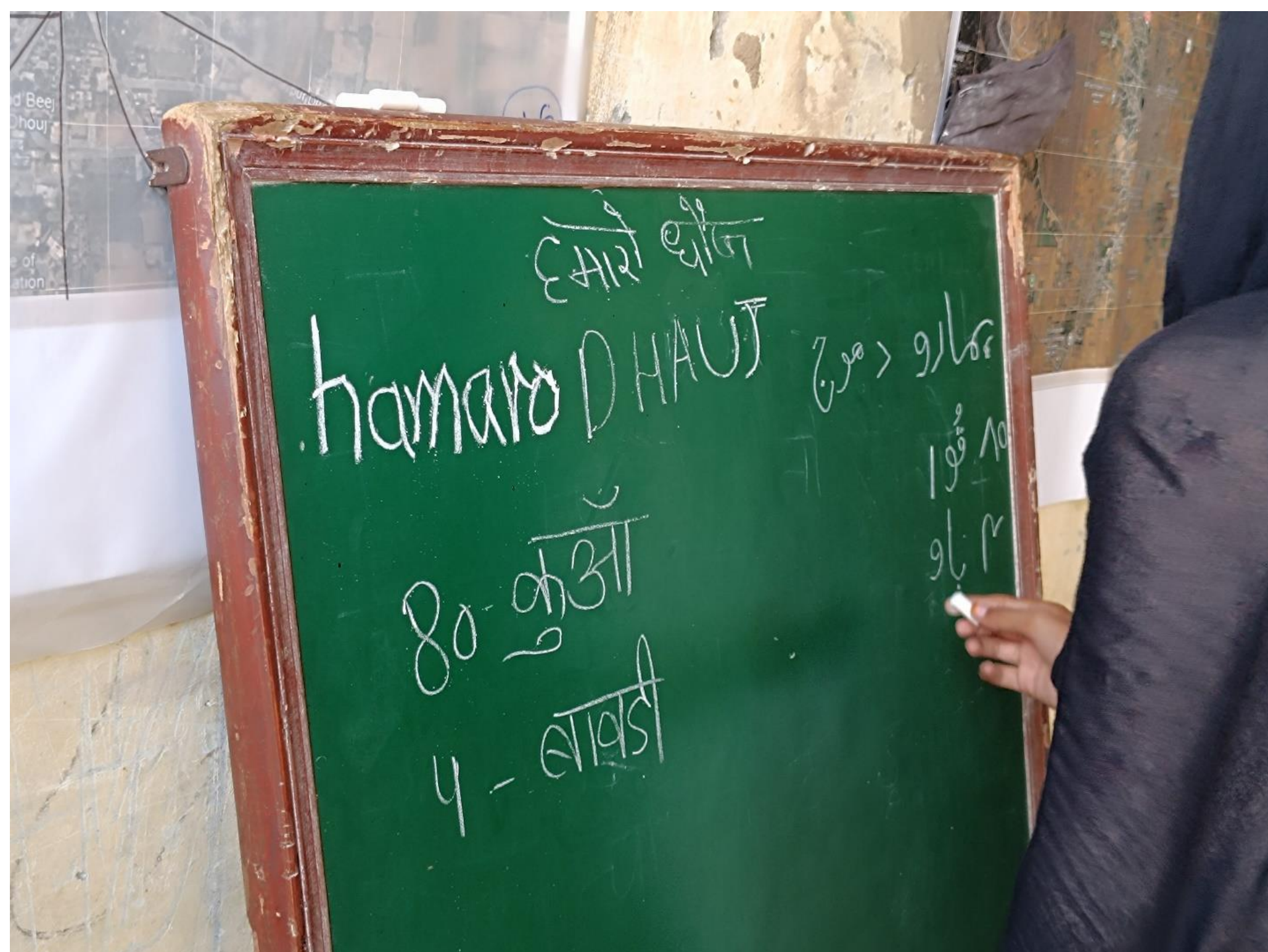
Children created "**everyday maps**" of their village, noting places they liked, disliked, or felt connected to.

They mapped **key civic and social infrastructure**, including schools, wells, roads, mosques, and their own homes.

Special attention was paid to Dhauj's historical identity as the "**village of 84 wells and baolis (stepwells)**", exploring how this water heritage shaped the settlement's cultural and ecological life.



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Activities Conducted

b. Nature and Heritage Walks

Children participated in **guided walks in the forested hill slopes of Dhauj** to observe native flora and understand seasonal landscape changes.

A curated **visit to the Aravalli Biodiversity Park** offered exposure to native plant and animal species, strengthening **biodiversity literacy**.

Traditional structures such as '**bonga**' (grain storage units for cattle fodder) were studied in detail—students created models, learned which wood was traditionally used, how they were made, and reflected on their disappearance due to changing livelihoods.



Bonga is a traditional structure to store fodder. Traditionally made of Dhau, Gangeti and Bansa,, it is becoming a rare sight in Dhauj with changing livelihoods



**Understanding
Bonga**



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Place Visited: Aravali Biodiversity Park Gurgaon

Participants: 57 students and 10 teachers from Dhauj Center

Aim of the activity: To introduce students and teachers about Aravalli's, exhibit how a restored landscape can look and how students and teachers can develop an appreciation and association with the Aravalli's-topography, flora and fauna.

Activities conducted and Resource Persons:

- Butterfly walks by Prachi Singh
- Native Flora Walk by Nidhi Batra and Rama Lakshmi Peri



**understanding
Native Flora &
Fauna**



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Activities Conducted

c. Oral Histories and Community Interaction

Interviews were conducted with village elders to gather **oral histories**, linking **ecology, cultural practices, and memory**.

Children explored the **relationship between the built environment and ecological traditions**, including informal cultural landmarks such as the **Dadi Piplanian shrine, Idgah, and a local peer baba**—structures that hold cultural significance but are often undocumented in official records.



*Dadi Piplasan's shrine
and archeological sites
at Dhauj*

**“History gives
answers only to
those who
know how to
ask questions.”**

Hajo Holborn



***Monuments
that shape us***



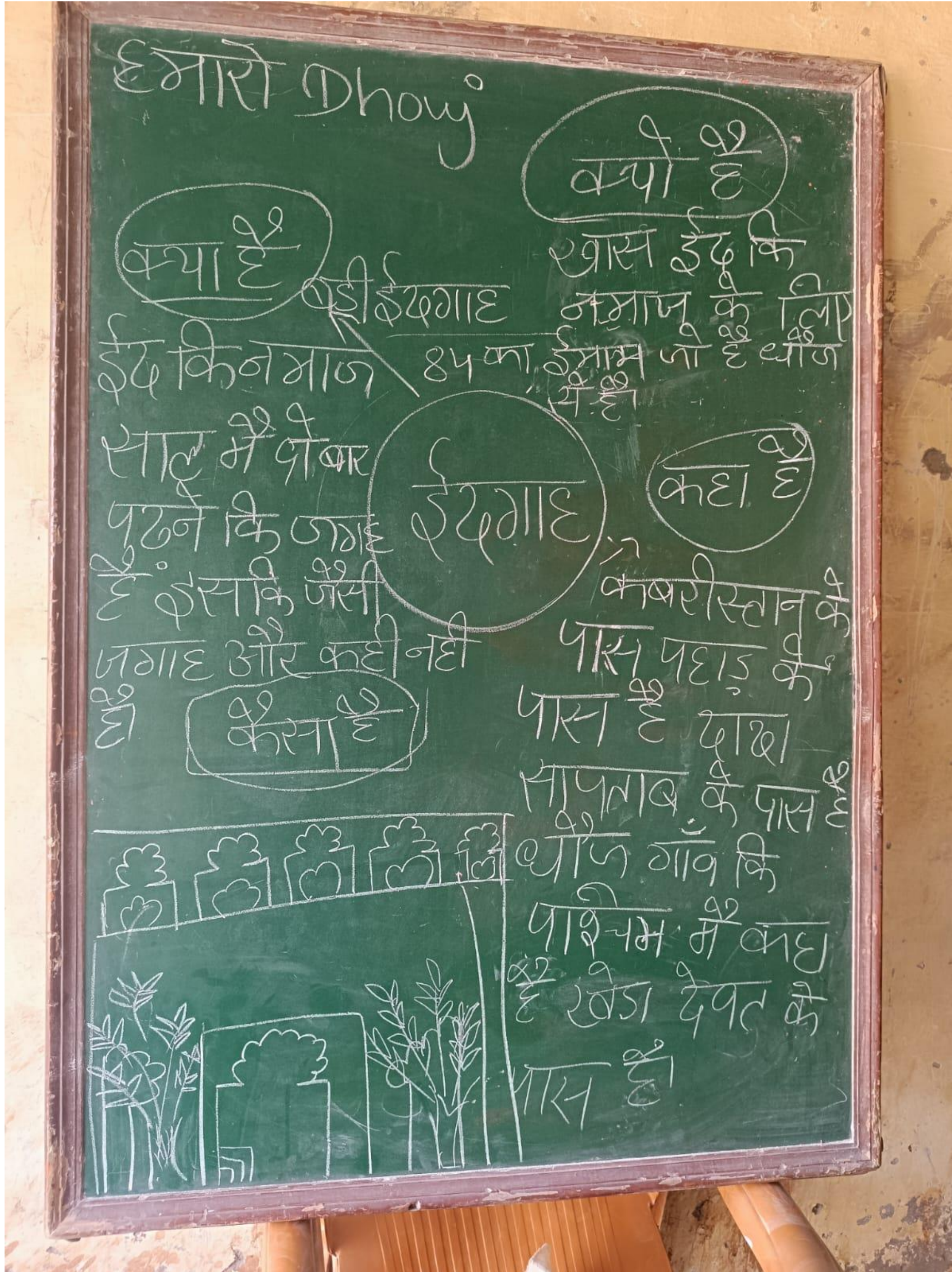
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Outputs and Impact

The project resulted in several meaningful outcomes:

Skill-building in observation, documentation, critical thinking, and multimedia use among 30+ students.

- Development of **community-led lesson modules** adaptable by local teachers.
- Creation of a **village-specific 'habitat information'**, visually capturing local ecological knowledge.
- Stronger **intergenerational dialogue** around the environment and heritage of Dhauj.
- Establishment of the tuition centre as a **safe learning space**, particularly for girls, where they could engage actively and confidently with themes of nature, history, and place.



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Activities Conducted

d. Documentation and Dissemination

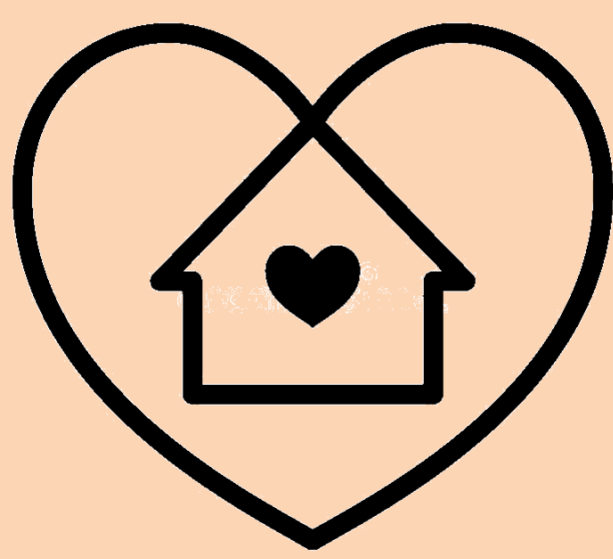
The children participated in documenting their observations through **drawings, photographs, audio recordings, and maps.**

A **local village exhibition** was held during a fundraiser organised by Laksh Foundation, engaging both residents and visitors.

Select works were showcased in a **public exhibition at the India Habitat Centre**, as part of the **Urban Adda series**, to create visibility for youth-led habitat inquiry.



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Locating Ourselves



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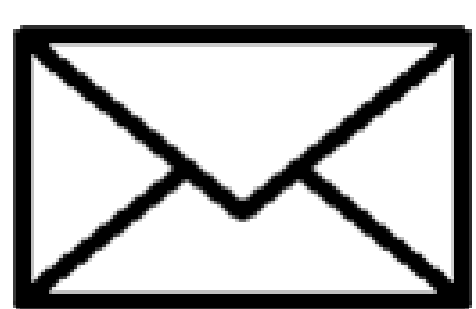


seh = together, reeti = practices
a platform for collaborative practices

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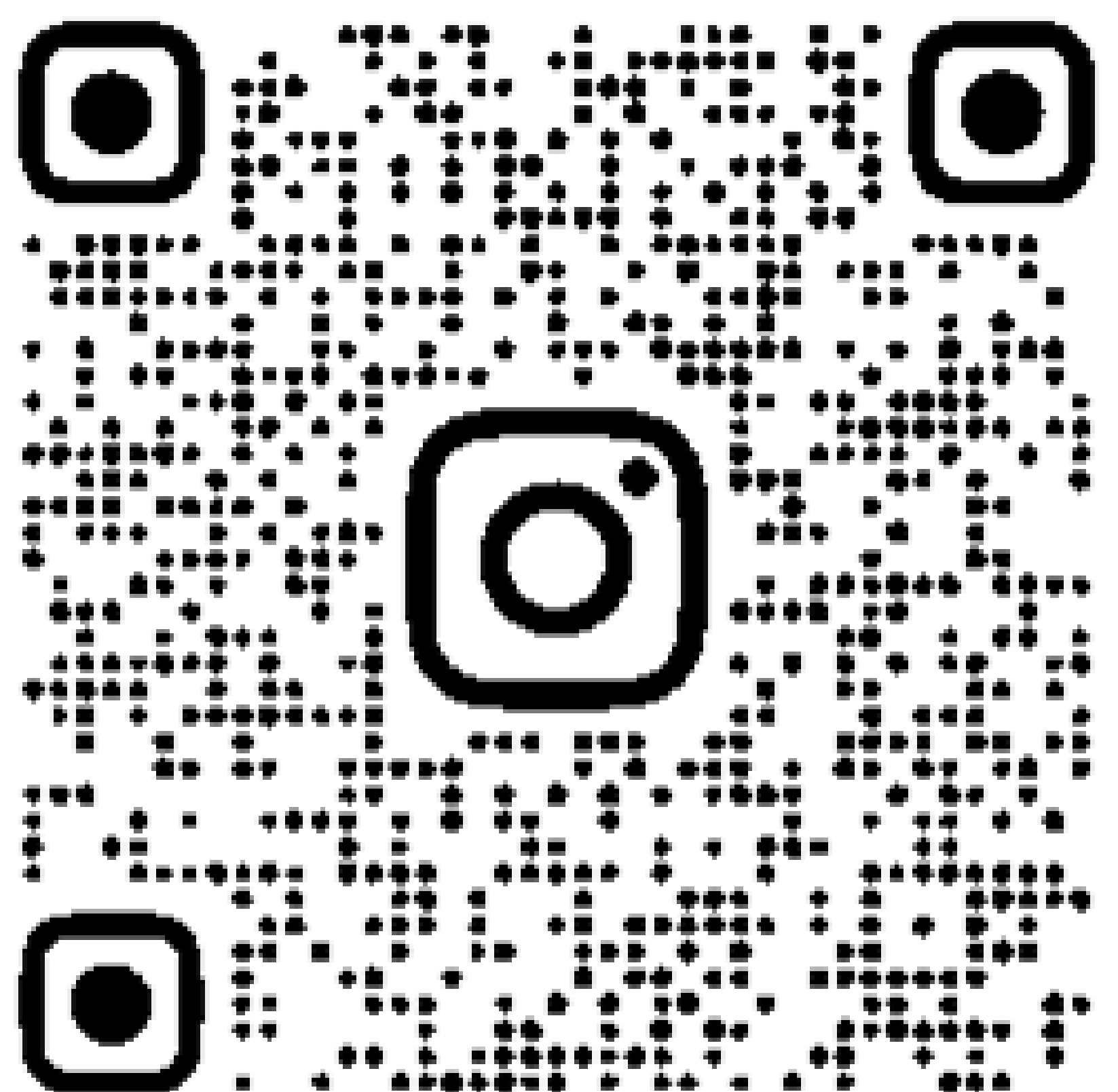
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sehreeti@gmail.com



**9717954045,
9810105200**



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