



ILLUSTRATION: ROHINIT PHORE

EVERY MORNING from 8-9:30 a.m. and every evening from 5-6:30 p.m., the residents of villages in the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh are audience to a special programme on the Amcho Bastar radio channel. This community radio channel was launched in June 2020 under the larger initiative of Padhai Tuhar Dwar of the Chhattisgarh state government. One of the primary objectives of the Amcho Bastar community radio is to impart school learning modules to young students in the villages who have been unable to attend schools owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. Bastar is an aspirational district in the red corridor facing multiple geographical and socio-economic constraints. However, through the firm resolve of the district administration, the radio programme which initially reached out to three panchayats has now spread to over 100 panchayats, ensuring access to learning material for hundreds of students.

Schools are not just centres of learning for young children, but also vital to their social growth and cognitive development. The Covid-19 pandemic brought about a severe disruption in the education system, especially in rural India. While schools and teachers in urban areas began a staggered transition to an online mode of classes, this was not easily achievable in many of the remote aspirational districts of India. In spite of limited internet facilities and digital tools, schools, teachers and parents aided by district administrations displayed tremendous resilience, adopting unique innovations to ensure the continuity of classes for students.

In another successful endeavour of the Padhai Tuhar Dwar initiative, aspirational district Rajnandgaon in Chhattisgarh organised *mohalla* classes for students living in far-flung areas with poor internet connectivity. Observing complete safety protocol, *mohalla* classes are carried out in villages close to the homes of young students. With the combined efforts of teachers and the district administration, the concept of *mohalla* classes is making sure that those students who don't have access to online classes can continue to attend lessons.

Hundreds of miles away from Rajnandgaon, on the banks of the Jhelum River, a similar initiative was spearheaded by aspirational district Baramulla in Jammu & Kashmir. Volunteer-driven open air community classes, in adherence with social distancing norms, were conducted in villages in various

shifts to cover as many students as possible. The initiative reached out to over 30,000 students in the district with the support of Panchayati Raj Institutions as well as several teachers who volunteered to conduct classes. This fortified the efforts of the administration to provide continuous lessons.

The state of Jharkhand, which is home to 16 aspirational districts and a rural tribal population that constitutes almost 26% of its total population, witnessed commendable efforts by various districts to ensure continuity of classes for school students. In the district of Gumla, doorstep delivery of school books and other study material has been facilitated by the district administration.

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A wonderful and inspirational instance of transforming adversity to opportunity emerged from the aspirational district Dumka. In the village of Dumarthar, school teachers have helped paint blackboards on the outer walls of students' homes. Every morning, the local school principal conducts lessons with a handheld loudspeaker, while students take down notes on their personal blackboards.

In spite of facing developmental roadblocks especially pertaining to digital connectivity, districts in Jharkhand have been making concerted efforts to defeat these constraints. The District Education Department of aspirational district Ramgarh introduced the Lockdown E-Pathshala. Apart from familiarising

teachers with digital education tools in the new normal, the platform disseminates study material to students through its YouTube channel. The Lockdown E-Pathshala initiative is also being broadcast through local television channels to reach a larger number of students. The two-pronged approach aims at capacity building for existing teachers and educators as well as ensuring consistency of classes at the elementary level. Ramgarh district administration is also in the process of setting up a low-cost studio infrastructure to record noise-free digital content for students.

A home is a child's first school, and parents are essential to a child's educational journey. Keeping this tenet in mind, the administration of aspirational district Goalpara in Assam started the Smart Papa, Smarter Mamas programme. Parents in Goalpara are being encouraged to take ownership of their children's education by participating in the campaign. Mothers of students are actively engaging with teachers to track their child's educational progress. The campaign has helped in controlling school dropout rates considerably.

Meanwhile, the central government along with the Ministry of Education is working relentlessly to bridge the digital divide. The PM eVIDYA initiative is a remarkable example of an umbrella project to provide impetus to digital/online/on-air education and enable multi-mode access to education. DIKSHA, the knowledge-sharing platform jointly developed by NCERT and the Ministry of Education, is also a crucial tool being leveraged across states and Union territories by students as well as teachers. SWAYAM is another example of the persistent efforts of the government of India to enable equitable access to quality teaching and learning resources to the most underprivileged sections of society. In a path-breaking step, the Prasar Bharati in a MoU with the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has made 51 educational TV channels with content from Swayam Prabha, e-Vidya and DigiShala available to households across India. These channels, which will be available as free of cost DD co-branded channels, mark an important endeavour by the Union government to include students from remote areas into the ambit of mainstream education. The recently announced National Education Policy also identifies equitable use of and access to technology for digital education as a key focus area. Various pilot studies are in progress to assess the benefits of online education as well as to chart out a roadmap to diminish the digital divide. The government remains strongly committed to its goal of education for all and these are some of the many steadfast steps directed towards achieving this goal.

There is also immense scope for developing alternative models of education in India, which can be utilised well to supplement the formal system of education. The 2020 Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the need to disrupt existing norms and innovate. In remote and rural areas, the concept of open schooling with more flexible academic rules can go a long way in addressing concerns of high dropout rates, low attendance and limited infrastructure. Such models of alternative education will also support vocational training and skill development in the aspirational districts of India.

Education is one of the most important drivers of the socio-economic prosperity and stability of a self-reliant India. The 112 aspirational districts face severe developmental challenges to equitable education, which have only been intensified by the pandemic. However, the cumulative efforts of district administrations, schools, teachers, parents and students across the aspirational districts to effectively respond to the Covid-19 crisis are truly laudable. By placing the continuity of school education at the centre of their reconstruction efforts, the aspirational districts have successfully leveraged technology as well as community participation and partnerships to ensure that no student is deprived of the joy of learning.

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Education for All towards a self-reliant India

How India's aspirational districts are ensuring remote learning in the wake of Covid-19