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A digital rural school in Barabanki

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Surya Agarwal, Hindustan Times
Email Author

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As soon as a bulb flickers in a distant house in Mauthri village, children start moving towards the house. It indicates time for their evening class. A small school in Mauthri village in Banki block of Barabanki district imparts education digitally to the children.

Live classes, taught by skilled teachers in local schools, are digitally recorded, made into DVDs and transferred to these under privileged schools. Children are taught English, Hindi, Maths and science using these pre-recorded DVDs.

A Philips television set and a DVD player sit in a rusty table that plays the DVDs for them a couple of time so that the students can grasp the lesson well. Their teacher Kanta pauses the film off and on, to explain certain concepts and make sure that the students are being able to understand the subject.

This project of digitally transmitting classes to under privileged is named Digital Study Hall (DSH) and was initiated by Dr Urvashi Sahni, President of Study Hall Educational Foundation

and Randy Wang, former assistant professor of Princeton University. Wang is now working full time on the DSH project.

The first DSH pilot has been operating in India since 2005. Currently, there are three hubs in Lucknow, Bangalore, and Pune. Till now they have about 500 DVD-quality recordings of lessons staged by skilled teachers. The languages used in the content include Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Tamil, and English.

The whole project is being funded by various organisations and individuals like Microsoft Research and Washington University. "Microsoft has shown special interest in our project and they have always come forward with financial aid. If things go well, then we might receive more grant from them," said Dr Sahni.

Presently, about 50 children, in different batches are studying in the informal school in Mauthri village. The afternoon batch is meant for girls between the age group of 15-18 years and the evening batch is for the little ones. Most of the students studying in this school appear as private candidate in the state board's exam.

The audio-visual method assists them in understanding the subject better. Kanta, their teacher is intermediate pass. She said, "The children have shown a lot of difference. They are more serious about their studies and wish to study further. We might soon have a teacher, who can teach them further." Kanta gets Rs 1,500 per month for imparting education to these students.

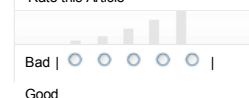
The students are equally excited about their new method of learning. Sabina Khatoon, a student said, "Its interesting to learn this way. Even after we've had out class the DVD keeps playing in my mind. I don't forget the class easily."

Dr Sahni said, "The main purpose of this project is to improve the quality of education in the rural as well as urban areas. And also to allow resource starved area to make use of the better quality and content of education available in good schools.

"However, work does not end after providing DVDs to the rural schools, we have to make sure that there is a mediator between the students and the television. Teachers are trained by us, so that they can explain the concept to the students and clarify their doubts."

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