

A social network puts 1st-gen learners in top edu institutes

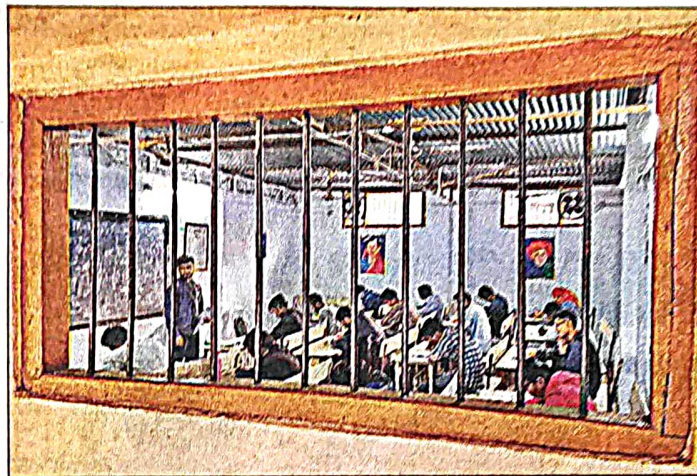
Vidarbha Edu Movement Helping Underprivileged Youths In 14 States

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When Harshal Chavhan made it to IIT-Hyderabad for a master's degree in development studies after clearing a rigorous selection process, the 24-year-old's parents didn't share his joy. "My parents don't know what an IIT is. They didn't even complete their matriculation exams," says the first-generation learner from Yavatmal. Chavhan's isn't an isolated case. The Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, which has seen thousands of farmer suicides, has become the cradle of an education movement — an initiative by first-generation learners to get hundreds of other first-generation learners to premier institutes of higher studies.

Chavhan, whose father works as a driver on hire, credits his success to another first-generation learner Raju Kendre who is a postgraduate in social work from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) Tuljapur. "The biggest hurdle for first-generation learners is that they have no one in the family to guide them. We lack confidence and don't have the skills to crack interviews," says Chavhan.

Born to farmers who didn't even complete primary school, Kendre understood this well. So, he, along with two other first-generation learners from TISS started Eklavya in 2017 to help students from marginalised sections get into top institutes of higher education. "In these four years, Eklavya has helped place over 220 first-generation learners from poor homes in tribal areas in premier institutes, including IIT, IIM, TISS, Azim Premji University (APU), Department of Social Work (DSW) of Delhi University and several other Central universities," says Kendre, who is from Buldhana district of Vidarbha and be-



Yavatmal-based Eklavya motivates first-generation learners from tribal areas to go for higher studies in a bid to create grassroots leadership to helm local development projects

longs to a nomadic tribe.

Experts on the ground provide rich testimonials of Eklavya's transformational work. Krishna Sudheer Patuju, assistant professor at TISS Tuljapur, says Kendre is not just supporting poor students but also helping the premier institutes fill their gaps and become truly representative of the society. Avinash Shirke, Ashoka fellow and principal of Savitri Jotirao College of Social Work in Yavatmal, says Eklavya's movement has the scope of growing and spreading to every corner of the country.

"It is kind of a chain reaction," says Komal Gorde, a first-generation learner who is pursuing a master's degree in education from APU. "Eklavya provided me with guidance and soft skills and helped me get into APU. Now I have turned into a mentor and am training around 20 students for interviews to this university," says the 21-year-old whose parents are farmers in Yavatmal. There are around 100 such first-generational learners who have now donned the mantle of mentors, says Kendre. "We have imparted training to students from 14 states, including those from Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana and

Rajasthan. But the bulk of the students who benefited from our programmes are from Maharashtra," adds Kendre.

Based out of Yavatmal, Eklavya conducts mock interviews, panel discussions and English-learning sessions to help these youths. It was organising 3-to-5-day-long residential workshops before the pandemic to get students into higher education programmes. The focus is to get youths to specialise in subjects like social work, law, public health, rural development and education. "We want to create hundreds of grassroots leaders so that they can helm development projects on the ground and bring about meaningful changes. They are better-suited for such roles because of their lived experiences," says Kendre.

Since the outbreak of Covid, Eklavya has mostly taken its training programmes online. But the silver lining is that it has been able to reach out to students from humble backgrounds in remote locations too. "Eklavya has mentored over 300 students since the onset of the pandemic and reached out to youths even in the northeast," says Kendre. The online courses are free and Eklavya only charges Rs100 for

food and lodging per day for the residential workshops. "We waive that too for students who can't afford it," he adds.

Not only with communication skills, Eklavya also helps with scholarships, says Arpit Shedmake, a first-generation learner who is pursuing an MBA in marketing from IIM-Visakhapatnam. "Most first-generational learners also come from very poor families and do not have the means of funding their higher education. Eklavya helps find and land scholarships," says the 25-year-old Gorde says Eklavya helped her in getting a 100% scholarship for her course in APU.

And the results have started showing in terms of grassroots leaders. Smita Tatewar, all of 23, is the deputy sarpanch of Loni village in Yavatmal. The daughter of a farmer and anganwadi teacher, who didn't even complete matriculation, has a postgraduate diploma in rural reconstruction and aims to empower women. "Most girls in my village study till the 10th standard and are married off. Raju sir (Kendre) and his team have kindled the passion for higher education in me and other girls in my area. They enabled me to contest the panchayat election," she says. Tatewar, who says she brings up fresh ideas at panchayat meetings, plans to work for the village children.

Tasting success in their initiative, Eklavya members are now planning to scale up. "We have launched a crowdfunding drive for Rs 30 lakh to have full-time staffers and create more centres across Maharashtra and in central India. It will also help us take the blended programmes to every corner of the country," says Kendre. Eklavya's target is to get 3,000 first-generation learners and students from marginalised sections into top institutes and churn out 1,000 developmental leaders from the grassroots by 2030.