

Street corner teacher: Deep Narayan Nayak
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Deep Narayan Nayak, a teacher at the state government promoted Tilka Maji Adibashi Free Primary School, in the Jamuria village (pop.1.5 lakh) in Paschim Bardhaman district of West Bengal, is popularly known as 'Raster Master' (Teacher of the Street). This enterprising 34-year-old educator turned walls of village homes into blackboards and roads into classrooms to ensure learning continuity of children during the prolonged pandemic lockdown of schools. In May 2020, 45 days after schools across the country were ordered closed to check the spread of the novel Coronavirus, Nayak began teaching village children under blue skies. An enterprise that started with six children has now grown to 2,000 students in 14 street study centres of Paschim Bardhaman.

Newspeg. After successfully implementing his learning model in 14 villages of Paschim Bardhaman, Nayak is all set to launch similar street study centres in other districts of Bengal. He has already finalised an April launch of centres in Bankura, Purulia and Midnapore districts.

History. Since he was appointed teacher at the state government-owned Tilka Maji Adibashi Free Primary in 2018, Nayak has been providing free-of-charge after-school tuition to tribal children. However, after lockdown of schools in March 2020, he realised that most of his students couldn't afford digital devices and hence spent the day loitering in the village or grazing cattle. Fearing his students would drop out of the education system altogether, he began conducting informal classes under trees and on street corners. As the number of children grew, he decided to use the mud walls of village houses as blackboards and began providing books and mid-day meals. Thus far, this initiative is self-funded with some help from his wife Jhuma Patra, a professor of Bengali at Raniganj Girls College in Paschim Bardhaman, and a handful of like-minded individuals.

Direct talk. "I have been getting a monthly salary from government without working during the pandemic. Therefore, I felt it was my duty to earn my keep. With many parents in the village having lost their jobs during the pandemic, and schools closed, they had put their children to work. If I had not intervened with my street classes, most children would have dropped out of the schooling system," says Nayak, a science graduate of BB College, Asansol, who earlier worked as a primary teacher at Bamunia Free Primary School.

Remarkably, Nayak has also been able to persuade women of the village to attend street classes. "Today 2,000 mothers of my students are attending classes with their children. I also persuaded them to get vaccinated against Covid-19. With schools having reopened recently, I have shifted my street classes to early mornings and evenings before and after school hours," says this education missionary whose unique initiative won him second prize in the Unicef Photo of The Year 2021 contest.

Future plans. Nayak is networking with corporate and government agencies to raise funding to take his teaching-learning model to the most backward rural hinterlands of India. "My street school model has worked wonders to contain the learning loss of children. I am confident it's an effective model for bridging learning gaps accumulated during the pandemic among underprivileged children," says Nayak.

Wind beneath your wings!