

THE MAGICAL WORLD OF THE INTERNET FOR REMOTE GOVERNMENT SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Balaji Jadhav was born into a farming family in the Latur district. He completed his diploma in education and moved to Satara as a teacher at the Zilla Parishad Primary School in Shindewadi, in Maan taluka. Most families here worked at brick kilns, did other kinds of manual labor, or were shepherds. When he joined the school, the attendance sheet had 23 names, but only 10 or 12 students would be present on any given day. Those belonging to the shepherd community would wander to nearby villages with their families and flocks, while others found school too boring.

It made Balaji uneasy to see these children wandering about the village, and he was constantly thinking of ways to get them back into school. Before this, he had worked in a private school that

did not have a clerk, so it often fell to him to fill in forms and do all the computer-related work. Being keen on technology, he browsed the net a good deal and gathered useful and interesting information. He decided to use computers to get the Shindewadi children to come to school. Shri Karade, the Principal, supported the idea, but the school did not have a computer. The people were too poor to contribute money, so Shri Jadhav bought a laptop with his resources.

The children loved watching cartoons and TV programs and playing video games, so initially, he let them watch the shows they liked and play games. The students were curious about the laptop and thrilled that the teacher allowed them to handle it. They would be impatiently waiting



Mr. Jadhav teaching students through tablet in classroom



School classroom equipped with ICT infrastructure

for their turn. Soon enough, they began to talk about these adventures to their friends who were not coming to school. This brought all the missing students back!

Introducing the online world to students

With the attendance barrier broken, the challenge was to get the students to progress academically. Shri Jadhav was a product of the “Latur pattern”, a teaching method that has become known for excellent academic results from that region. He strongly believed that the students needed to do well academically, and started downloading games that would complement their syllabus. The scholarship exam held particular significance in this rural area, and he motivated the Class-4 students to work for this. All who appeared for the exam cleared it, though none of them managed to get the scholarship. Shri Jadhav was disappointed, and tried to identify the areas that needed more attention. He downloaded relevant videos and created a huge question bank. These efforts bore fruit and in 2008, a few students from the school won the coveted scholarship for the first time. After that, the students of Shindewadi ZP School created a record of sorts by getting scholarships for the next seven consecutive years.

When the students won the scholarship for the second year in a row, both the Principal and the Extension Officer applauded his efforts. The questionnaires Shri Jadhav had prepared for his students were circulated to other schools. When students from over 60 schools got the scholarship, the Extension Officer encouraged Balaji to take the project to more schools.

The school now had 50 students enrolled. Even the brick kiln owners started sending their children to school, instead of patronizing the English-medium schools in the vicinity.

Around this time, Balaji learned about blogging from a friend, and in 2010, he started website – www.shikshanbhakti.in – in which he shared ideas on how to make the syllabus more interesting, suggested projects that could be complementary to the syllabus, and included

the practice questionnaires he had devised for the scholarship exam. The response was very good. But some teachers pointed out that they had to get printouts of the question papers, and this was expensive. So Shri Jadhav learned HTML programming and made the question papers available online on the blog. These online tests are always multiple choice. After selecting the correct answers, when one “submits” the answer sheet, the result takes barely a moment to appear. It is then simple to check the answers and to get the correct answers for wrong responses. This, for the teachers, was like opening a treasure box. Once the online tests became accessible, almost 12,000 schools began visiting the website every day!

Shri Jadhav then realised that out of the 12000 schools that visited the website, almost 10,000 belonged to the urban areas of Maharashtra. For the rural schools he thought of using Flash software to create offline tests. First, he developed an off-line application called “Std4th”, which had complementary projects for all the relevant subjects and tests. He designed the software so that it could be used with an android phone as well. This way, teachers could choose to download the App on their tablets or mobiles when there was Internet connectivity. Their students could later do the tests, and even get their results, offline.

He started developing these offline apps in 2014; the response from all over the state was good. That year, his blog received the Best Website Award from Yashwantrao Chavan Pratishthan. He was also chosen as one of the four best teachers from India by Google India. In 2014, when he received this honour, the other three chosen teachers for the award belonged to the IITs and worked in metropolises.

Children explore the world through the Internet

Shri Jadhav downloaded videos related to art and craft, gardening and music for the children. They would tour the world through YouTube or play videos on choreography and practice dance. This led to one student Prathamesh Mane’s qualifying for the “Dance India Dance” competition in 2013 – a moment of great pride for the entire school. Others performed well in various district-level competitions.

Meanwhile, the Principal Secretary, School Education, and Sports, Shri Nandakumar, formed a group of teachers who were using and experimenting with technology in this manner. Today there is a force of such techno-savvy teachers in the state. Currently, the



Student recording story on tablet

teachers are making videos that are meant to serve as an additional resource in school education, to be made available through the MITRA app.

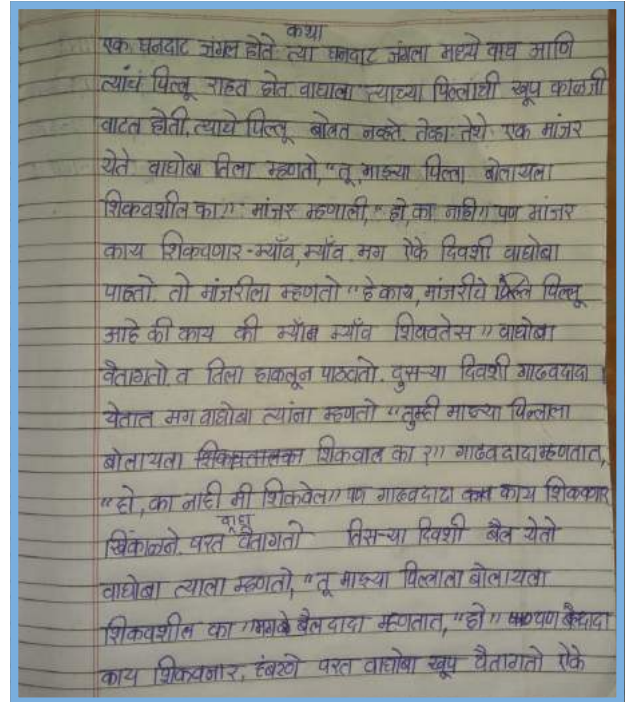
Since 2014, Shri Jadhav has conducted around 120 workshops on behalf of the state government for teachers and education officers in the state. He has demonstrated how to make one's own videos, upload them on YouTube, and use open-source software and other technology in these workshops. These workshops are usually held during the summer vacations, and on Sundays.

He also uses "Google Earth". This makes it possible for a child to tour the Himalayas while sitting in a remote village! He has even shown his students the Taj Mahal, from all possible angles! He is a "Google certified teacher."

Shri Jadhav also has a YouTube channel called Shikshanbhakti. The blog has a large amount of study material for students. In contrast, the YouTube channel shows how to browse, type in Marathi, make videos, and a tutorial in photo-editing and other such lessons that may be useful for teachers. For the last two years, he has also worked in Maharashtra state's IT cell for e-governance. This collaboration with the National Informatics Centre includes the SARAL system of the education department and other projects.

In 2019, Shri Jadhav was transferred from Shindewadi to the Pulkoti primary school. Here, the parents are slightly better off, so Shri Jadhav managed to mobilize resources for three tablets. The parents receive SMSs with a description of the homework given to students. This initiative has been much appreciated in the taluka, because now practically all students come to school with their homework done. It has also helped start a dialogue between the parents and the teachers. All the students have now received tablets donated by the Atul Foundation Gujarat.

He has received many awards, including from Google, Microsoft and the National E Innovation Award 2017, the Global Innovation Award 2018, Indian Icon Award 2018, Innovation for Education Award 2015, Digital Innovator Award 2015, Best Teacher of the Year Award 2018, and awards from many social organizations.



Story written by Std.3 student



QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

1. How to teach children to use the Internet?
2. How to be careful while taking various information from the internet
3. How can the Internet be used to give children group work?

QUESTIONS FOR TRAINEES

1. How do you ensure that children use the Internet as needed?
2. How to teach children to use tabs properly?
3. How does the Internet help parents to engage their children in school?