

A Bridge Across Forever

Gyan-Setu project aims to expose students from remote parts of the country to the world of science through workshops

Students in Chhatisgarh listen with rapt attention as a volunteer explains concepts of science, as part of the pilot workshop held last year; (right) A student at the pilot workshop conducted in May this year, at Leh



in various batches to Chhatisgarh and Ladakh in the latter half of last year and beginning of this year. "The experience changed them and even established long term relationships. The students they taught in Ladakh still call them from public phone booths," he says.

Starting from August 15, this year, the project's first phase will go on till August 15, 2014, with volunteers going to the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhatisgarh and Jammu & Kashmir. The first batch of volunteers is set to go to Ladakh in September.

Ponkshe explains that they have identified local organisations in each of the four states to help them select schools where their volunteer teams can go. The workshops will typically be about six-hours long, consisting of some demonstrations, practical experiments and a field trip to understand the eco-system. "One of our main goals is to ignite students' minds by communicating to them that learning is fun and if they start thinking in scientific ways, various problems can be dealt with," says

Ponkshe, who has visited each of the four states and therefore "knows the ground realities".

Gabale shares that each volunteer team will consist of about three or four members and their visit will last about a week. "We already have 60 registrations and the volunteers include graduate and post-graduate students and IT professionals from Pune, Nasik, Ratnagiri and even Bangalore," says Gabale, adding that they are expecting the number to go up to about 200.

JOYCE WILLIAM JOHN

PRANITH Simha tells a story of a time in Dantewada, Chhatisgarh, when a group of school students was taken to the lone swanky auditorium in the district for a movie. Simha expected to hear a lot of excited chatter but there was none at all. There was also no collective cry of disappointment when the show was interrupted in the middle; only a very passive audience of teenagers. To Simha it showed how little exposure the children from the backward district had.

"They have not grown up hearing about movie halls, trains or aeroplanes. They are completely isolated from the

world around them," says Simha, who was a student in Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) when he first visited Dantewada with his friend Kaushtubh Deshpande in December 2011.

When they returned to Pune, the two, together with their friend Kalyani Katariya, shared the experience with Vivek Ponkshe,

head of Educational Activity Resource Centre-Jnana Prabodhini, and the plan for Gyan-Setu project germinated. A collaborative effort

of Jnana Prabodhini, Disha-IISER and Janeev Yuva, Gyan-Setu will conduct a year-long programme of conducting science-based workshops for children in backward states through volunteers.

"Our objective is to expose children from these states to the world of science and technology, while also inspiring students and professionals to have a proactive approach towards addressing social issues. It is give and take, which is why we call it a *setu* – a bridge," shares Shrikant Gabale, coordinator, Gyan-Setu.

Ponkshe, who is chief coordinator of the project, says as a pilot workshop they had sent about 20 volunteers

**movers
shakers**

