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## **ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-510**

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## Helping dropouts find their way back to school

Through his Lakshya Foundation, a BMC staffer has been voluntarily teaching rural and tribal students for 12 years, writes Sudhir Suryawanshi

The dropout rate of children at rural and tribal areas of Maharashtra has become a major concern. However, Shirish Patil, an engineer at Asia's largest civic body – the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation – believes he can turn the tide.

For over 12 years, Patil has been running the Lakshya Foundation (LF) that works for the welfare of educationally deprived and oppressed students. After office hours, Patil, as part of LF, visits tribal hamlets and meets students who dropped out of school for various reasons.

Over the years, he witnessed many bright students give up on their studies because the government school in their village teaches only up to Class 4. Their parents found it expensive to relocate and get them enrolled in better schools. Patil noticed that the government runs many programmes for school students, but almost no programme for dropouts. “My aim is to bring every dropout to mainstream education, by encouraging them to resume their studies and complete their choice of course,” he says.

Patil notes that these students wish to study further, but often the situation is not in their favour. “We live in the 21st century and talk about technology. In rural and tribal areas, students are deprived of basic facilities, including education. Much work is needed for this section,” says Patil.

The BMC staffer decided to set up the foundation while doing fieldwork in Dharavi. “My boss had rang me up, instructing me to fix a pipeline leak. When I went there, I saw a woman teaching slum children next to a pipeline. That incident made me want to do something similar for needy students,” said Patil. To help dropouts return to school, he began private classes for them where the focus is on primary subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science. “Once they have the will, we fill up Form 17 that gives them the direct opportunity to appear for Class 10 and 12 board exams. Once students clear these exams, they can apply for any vocational course or pursue higher education,” he says.

Patil also revamped existing government community halls for his cause. “With the help of a friend, I started a library at one such hall for local students. We put in a bookshelf and even set up computers,” Patil said.

When schools had shut down and many underprivileged students had no access to a smartphone/laptop to avail of online learning, Patil devised another option. "We trained bright school students to visit the houses of fellow students in their locality, every morning and evening." Tutorials, lasting 20-25 minutes long, were conducted outside such homes, which helped students to continue to remain in touch with their studies.

What keeps him going is encounters with his past students, who were once dropouts but went back to studying, completed their graduation or vocation training, and now earn quite well. "One student went on to become the sarpanch in her village, and is doing good work here," says Patil, with a sense of pride.

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