A vision that changed state ZP schools

● **BHAVNA UCHIL**
Mumbai

In the remote village of Pashtepada in the tribal block of Shahapur in Thane district, a digital school was born in 2009. It became the state's first such school. The team behind this school has been going across the length and breadth of the state to replicate the idea.

Seven years later, the idea has been replicated in over 15,000 schools, from Nashik and Nandurbar to Gadchiroli and Sindudurg districts.

Children were dropping out of Zilla Parishad schools. It was a matter of survival for these schools. They needed a brand to survive.

The idea of making use of technology for education occurred to Sandeep Gund, a teacher in school, when a television came to the backward village. "Half the children in my class were absent and watching the TV open-mouthed," says Sandeep.

"I thought why not make the screen the medium of education," he says.

To a first-time visitor, the Zilla Parishad Primary Digital school, Pashtepada comes as a pleasant surprise. Right from the gate to the classroom, every inch is colourfully painted.

"In a digital school the idea is to have an environment that appeals to children," says Sandeep (28). It was Sandeep and Pandharinath Dongre, both colleagues, who were the brain behind the digital school concept. The school became digital when electricity was yet to reach it.

When the weight of school bags has become a concern, the children learn using tablets right from Class I.

There is no blackboard here but a touch screen interactive board. Showing a demo of how it works, Sandeep drags a figure of a human body using a magnetic stick to the centre of the board.

"Earlier we had to pull children to attend school, now we have to ask them to leave," says Sandeep.

When Sandeep was appointed as a teacher to this school at 22, he had tried his best to avoid the appointment. "I did not report to work for 15 days. The place had no roads then. I felt I had gone back in time," says Sandeep.

The school is 40 kms from the nearest railway station.

One has to take multiple modes of transport to get to the school and walk the last two kilometres by foot.

Today, Sandeep and his team of four teachers have conducted over 100 workshops and trained over 40,000 teachers across the state, motivating them to make their schools digital too. Interestingly, all the over 15,000 digital schools have become digital without government funds and totally on community participation. As much as 121 crores were spent, but none out of government coffers.

The team asks people to make use of CSR and social media as well to seek help for the purpose. Sandeep spends two days of the week on conducting such training workshops across the state. "It is all possible because of the supportive officials like Kishor Nimbalkar, CEO of Thane district," he says.

He says that not only in Maharashtra, but all schools in the country should become digital. The team has visited Rajasthan, West Bengal, Orissa and Gujarat so far.

"We have learnt one thing. If you have a will to do some good, it will certainly happen," says Dhimte.

Students from ZP School in Pashtepada learing through a digital board.