

# Phone tutors help kids in tribal belt of Maharashtra connect to English

A US-returned techie has roped in volunteers from various cities to help students from govt schools brush up language skills

Omkar Khandekar

For the past year, Keyan Dhali has been receiving one-on-one English-language tutorials after school hours at his mud house in Talasari, in Palghar district of Maharashtra.

All he has to do at the weekly sessions, which last for a couple of hours, is turn on the spare mobile. His foreign tutor calls and the two read a book together. Usually, it's a book of folk tales, or about village life. Rajeshwari Godbole, a software engineer and Keyan's tutor, explains the story, and works on her 10-year-old student's fluency, pronunciation and comprehension.

One day, Keyan, currently studying in the Zilla Parishad school, hopes he might even learn enough English and go to the US to meet her.

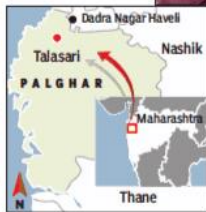
Like Keyan, over a hundred students from government schools in Talasari have been getting similar phone lessons to improve their English language skills. The tutors are a mix of students, retirees and employed professionals and live in mostly urban areas — Pune, Mumbai and, in Keyan's case, Boston. They have never met their students but for a few hours every week, they connect with them via phone and read a book together. One book done, they move on to the next — of a slightly higher difficulty level.

The activity is part of a unique initiative called 'Read A Story', started by Amod Joshi, an engineer from Pune who moved to Talasari, a tribal-dominated area, after over a decade of working in the US. It started with his attempts to educate his caretaker's kids at his ancestral bungalow in Talasari, recalls Joshi. Even as he enrolled them in the local school, he realised that it lacked quality teaching, staff or educational resources. "In the local Zilla Parishad school, for example, there are only eight teachers for 450 students," says the 46-year-old.

To bridge this gap, Joshi and his friend Gauri Mehendale, a Pune-based social worker, decided to take advantage of the cheap phone call rates to set up a platform facilitating one-on-one phone conversations between English-speakers and seekers. The tutors call up a common number and are redirected to the students assigned to them. Joshi also added callmasking and random call-recording for



**TELE-TEACHERS:** Students in Talasari get phone lessons from tutors they have never met as part of the 'Read A Story' initiative



security reasons. Video calls are not possible due to poor connectivity. Both of them assembled a group of volunteers who would read with the students from e-copies of books Joshi had sent to them.

Rajesh Vaghat, in-charge of the Girgaon Zilla Parishad school in Talasari, says he was delighted at the prospect of English-language tutorials for his students. The reason: most of the teachers in his school, Vaghat included, struggle with the language themselves. "I have a degree in Marathi but since we

teaching tribal students, such as the lack of understanding of Marathi among students, migration, and unsupportive home environments," the study noted.

Children are also under pressure to quit school and supplement household income. "I often see a lot of kids dropping out after Class VIII and go into fisheries or join local industries to earn money," adds Vaghat.

Joshi says he tries to sensitise students about the benefits of continuing education. "In India, English works as an option multiplier," says Joshi. "The students may not get perfect at English but if they get to Class XII with these skills, they will have far more options in education and career."

An independent evaluation of 100 students a few months ago showed that 81% of those tutored had a substantial learning gain. Learning gain was calculated based on the student's ability to read words, sentences and paragraphs. Bolstered by this, Joshi intends to launch tutorials for 200 students in the ongoing academic year. This will include English speaking sessions with small groups of students.

"I'm still scouting for tutors," he says. "I'm not too worried from the student side. I know there's enough need."

Godbole, who has been teaching Keyan for the past year, says she was surprised at her student's eagerness to learn a new language. "After reading for over 20 minutes, I ask him if he wants to continue. He almost always does," she says.

Keyan Dhali can't wait for the time he's learnt enough. "I want to grow up to be an English teacher," he says. "Then I'll teach everyone right here."

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**AMOD JOSHI | Founder, Read A Story**

lack subject-specialists, I have to teach English too," he says. "I try to read up before classes, referring to the dictionary as much as I can. But I still struggle with the grammar." Also in a place like Talasari, where most students are first-generation learners, it is difficult to find qualified teachers willing to come from urban areas every day, explains Vaghat.

A Unicef study on tribal communities in Maharashtra in 2017 found that schools in regions dominated by indigenous communities faced a range of issues. "Teachers faced several challenges