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From A,B,C to HSC in three years

NGO helps 22 hearing-disabled students clear Class XII exams

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Most have siblings with disabilities for whom they are now role models

Three years ago, a team of corporate employees from Mumbai, who began their mission to train hearing-disabled students for higher education, saw their efforts bear fruit as their first batch of students cleared HSC exams this year and did exceptionally well.

"When we got these students from four special schools in the city, they were from regional mediums. We began by teaching them English right from the alphabet. Their families felt awkward that they were learning from kindergarten-level books," said Nasr Adamji, one of the teachers at NGO *TEACH* (Training and Education Centre for Hearing Impaired), which runs from a space at Mumbai University's Kalina campus.

In 2016, Aman Sharma and Deepesh Nair, conducted a study of avenues for higher learning for hearing-disabled students. "Most drop out after Class X due to lack of options. In special schools, they usually learn vocational skills such as bookbinding, laddoo making etc. One school trustee remarked what would the students do with higher studies when they would end up doing domestic chores. This is the mindsetw," said Sharma, who quit his position as a risk manager at Deutsche Bank last year. "I could not do both," he said.

The first year, the students were trained in basic English, Math, Computers and behavioural course to help them cope with the frustration about their disability, poor self-esteem and communication. In the second year, they learnt Class XI Commerce subjects and in the third, they studied Class XII Commerce subjects. They filled forms for the exams as private students. The first batch had 23 students of which 22 cleared HSC.

"We focused only on Commerce because our team comprises MBAs and finance professionals. Arts requires a lot of reading and subject experts and for Science you also need better infrastructure such as laboratories," Sharma said.

Sharma and his friends taught the students in sign language which they "picked up on the job." They even designed much of the visual content for study material themselves.

The students themselves were thrilled about their performance. "My family did not expect me to score so well. They got me a cake," said Divya Bhanishali, 22, who got 61 per cent in Commerce. Bhanishali would wake up at 6.30 am every day and study the whole day, taking breaks every two hours.

Maaz Khan, 19, who got 58 per cent, has already got four treats for his performance and Pankaj Shelar, 22, who scored 62 per cent, distributed sweets.

Some of the students like Aniket Bhanishali, 21, who got 65 per cent and Rahul Bhosale, 22, who got 64 per cent, and Amir Lulia, 20, who got 61 per cent, have siblings with hearing disability for whom they are now role models.

The students are now gearing up for degree college studies through correspondence from the varsity's Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL) programme.

TEACH does not charge fees for students from lower-income groups and charges one third the amount for the rest. "The per student cost was Rs 2,743 per month for the year 2019-20. We are managing with individual donors and are looking for sponsors. We need to pay our teachers too," Sharma said.

(If you wish to contribute to TEACH, contact Aman Sharma at 9820818214)