

Evening learning centres give kids and adults a second shot at education

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MUMBAI: Lalitha Raman, a 60-year-old resident of Aarey's Ganesh Nagar and daughter of a dabbawala, had to drop out of school in Class 8 to work with her mother. Several decades later, in 2023, she walked into an evening learning centre run by NGO Masoom, intending to enrol students from her Adivasi community. But so inspired was she by the teaching methods and the supportive environment that she decided to enrol herself instead.

"After 43 years, I picked up my books again," she said. "It was the happiest moment of my life." Raman's determination had a ripple effect, and soon her son Dinesh and daughter-in-law also joined the centre and cleared their Class 10 exams. Dinesh, now 32, is preparing for his Class 12 exams and dreams of becoming a lawyer.

"The concept of evening learning centres has been a game-changer, especially in Maharashtra," said Masoom's CEO, and former IAS officer Nikita Ketkar, adding that students could appear for their Class 10 exams through the National Institute of Open Schooling board without being tied to rigid schedules. Initially focused on Mumbai, the model has now expanded to Gujarat and other regions.

Like Masoom, several organisations, working in partnership with government initiatives under the National Education Policy 2020, are giving people a chance to rebuild their dreams. Santosh Surve, who started the Jana Jagriti Vidyarthi Sangh, which works in Chikuwadi, Mankhurd and Mandala, recalls how the organisation began in the mid-1990s after his family migrated from Konkan. "We noticed that many children, espe-



Women from adivasi and minority communities in Chikuwadi, Mankhurd were taught how to write their names. SATISH BATE/HT PHOTO

cially girls, were dropping out of school," he said. "We decided to start Jana Jagriti to bring education back to the community."

With support from NGOs like Apnalaya, Surve and his team began enrolling nearly 1,000 students every year in government schools. Before admission, the students received basic literacy

training at centres established in local societies, which also offered vocational courses to balance formal education with livelihood skills.

Parvati Chauhan, a 53-year-old who returned to school after nearly four decades, joined a tailoring course at the Jana Jagriti centre. Here, she saw several

other tailoring students pursuing formal education side by side, and, inspired, decided to appear for her Class 10 exams this year. Even those working in government jobs are benefitting. A Class 4 BMC employee shared how completing his Class 10 exams through an evening learning centre opened up new opportunities for promotions. "Now I'm preparing for Class 12," he said.

The literacy drive is also reaching marginalised communities such as the LGBTQ+ population. Aliza Rashid Shaikh, a transgender woman who dropped out in 2016 due to rejection and discrimination, enrolled in a Masoom special education centre in 2024 and scored an impressive 74% in her Class 10 exams. She plans to do a diploma in medical laboratory technology after Class 12 and ultimately hopes to become a doctor. Aarti Rajan Chafe

dropped out of school after losing her mother because her family couldn't afford the fees. The Magic Bus (an NGO working for out-of-school students) team stepped in and worked with the school to resolve the fee issue. After 12 follow-ups with her reluctant family and constant encouragement, Aarti rejoined school with a new confidence and determination.

According to ASER data, over 40 million students across India are out of school, thousands of these from Maharashtra. Shashikant Gawas, senior employee of Masoom, said, "We've seen many success stories where people have cleared Class 10 and Class 12 after decades. These centres give them hope, dignity, and opportunities they thought were lost forever."

Vasant Kalpande, former director of education, believes that these initiatives are essential to achieve a literate society.