

Stars come home: 100 astronomy labs take off in UP village schools, create international buzz

TNN | Apr 6, 2022, 05:27 AM IST



BULANDSHAHR: For 66-year-old Harswarup Bhati, the moon is no longer "a beautiful silver dish" shining in the night sky above. "When I looked at it through a telescope, I saw numerous huge black spots. I wonder why we hear so many songs and poems about its beauty," he laughed. Harswarup is a resident of Mukundgarhi village in Bulandshahr, one of the 100 villages that house astronomy labs set up using panchayat funds at local government schools. TOI spent several nights in these villages to witness what one villager called "a small miracle".

These labs are equipped with a telescope, spectrometer, and a variety of pedagogical models depicting Newton's laws of motion. Charts highlighting various aspects of astronomy have been put up everywhere.

Started as a pilot project on Teacher's Day last year in Sikandrabad (rural), Bulandshahr, the district boasts 109 labs set up within a span of six months. "We had proposed this project to roughly 160 gram panchayats and 100 agreed to set up these labs using their own funds. Each lab costs around Rs 2.5 lakh," said Abhishek Pandey, chief development officer, Bulandshahr.

An IAS officer and an IIT engineer, Pandey has been a proponent of "experiential learning" in schools and communities. "The astronomy labs being established at primary and upper-primary schools are built around the New Education Policy and are aimed at stoking space curiosity at the community level. We want to include both children and adults and explore possibilities of 'citizen science'.

That means general public engagement in scientific research activities by using tools and resources provided to them," he said. The labs have generated a great amount of interest in astronomy, both among children as well as adults. Every night, village women make a beeline to gaze at the stars. This endeavour has also led to the emergence of "khagol doots" (astronomy messengers) among selected school students with a keen interest in science.

These messengers act as guides as well as help their teachers in managing the labs. One of the khagol doots, Chanchal Kumari, a class VIII student at a government school in village Nizampur, told TOI, "We had only heard about Kalpana Chawla and her contribution to space science. However, after these labs, I am beginning to understand what she was into. There is a whole new world that we are now able to explore. I have made up my mind. I will become an astronomer."

The spark of interest in these hamlets has generated international buzz. Recently, British High Commission donated 35 computers to these labs in order to help children process streaming data from dozens of telescopes across the world. Manu Prakash, a Stanford University professor and world-renowned innovator of frugal scientific instruments, donated 500 foldscopes.