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PRADHAN-LD TINKER ON WHEELS-PRIZE

Top rural award to Odisha engineer who ferries fun and science to village kids

(Eds: Changing slug, adding info and quotes )

New Delhi, Nov 8 (PTI) It's no ordinary village bus to ferry passengers. A veritable treasure chest of knowledge and fun, the minibus known as Tinker on Wheels travels from school to school in rural areas and invites students on board to give them a hands-on experience of scientific activities such as robotics and 3D printing.

The brainchild behind Tinker on Wheels is a 28-year-old engineer from Odisha who was honoured this week with the third Rohini Nayyar Prize for Outstanding Contribution to Rural Development.

"I also had the IIT dream once upon a time and was heartbroken when I couldn't make it. I pursued my engineering from a government college in Orissa. When I began working as an engineer, I realised there is a huge gap in what is being taught in schools and what is actually happening in industry," Anil Pradhan told PTI on Friday.

"While students in metro cities still have exposure to hands-on-learning. It is very limited for students in rural areas and that is why I thought of starting this," said Pradhan.

He started with 200 students in 2017 and has helped 2.5 lakh students so far with his Tinker on Wheels.

The students gather in the school playground, where the minibus is parked and the play area gets converted into a laboratory for the day giving them a chance to innovate and create.

The schools where the bus goes are the ones which do not have infrastructure for offering hands-on learning to students.

The unique project has reached over 140 schools in Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Telangana, and has reached over 2.5 lakh students.

"Earlier, we used to identify such schools and would get in touch with them but now schools reach out themselves too. Depending upon the number of students at the school, mostly above Class 5, we arrange the time span for visit of the bus. Sometimes it goes for a day, sometimes for more days, depending upon the strength. The idea is to give at least eight hours to each batch of students.

He said the educators on the bus work with the school teachers to design activities for the students according to their aptitude. The students get to conduct experiments, create things with 3D printing and innovate. They are also trained about cutting edge technologies like AI and Machine Learning, he said.

While schools which can afford to pay are charged a nominal fees of Rs 50-100 per child, the project also caters to schools which do not have a budget through CSR funding.



Pradhan who hails from Baral village in Orissa, said he no longer regrets not going to an IIT.

"The future is here, but our schools are lagging behind. Students, especially those in rural areas, are missing out on cutting-edge technology like AI, ML, IoT, robotics, space tech, 3D Printing and more. There is a significant skill gap in the technology sector. All this is a bigger challenge to solve and going to an IIT may have given me better exposure but not to my mission.

"In this era of easily accessible data, children are not given the chance to think or reason for themselves. Model-making workshops, audio-visual presentations, role-playing activities and exploring the physical world help to deliver the message of classroom lessons in a more interesting and effective manner. By encouraging children, we can train them to be independent and solve problems on their own, thus nurturing their confidence and self-belief," he said.

Pradhan was the chief designer of Asia's first university rocket team, VSLV. His return to his rural roots in 2017 fuelled by his mission to bring hands-on education to under served areas, led to the idea of Tinker on Wheels.

He also built a team of students from India that won world rank 3 at the NASA Rover Challenge in 2021, Asia's first Under-19 team to do so.

The Rohini Nayyar award, instituted in memory of Rohini Nayyar, one of India's esteemed economists, is conferred annually in recognition of outstanding contributions to rural development.

Nayyar, whose illustrious career spanned various roles, including teaching economics at Delhi University's Miranda House college, serving in the Indian Administrative Service for five years, and ultimately retiring as principal advisor for rural development, has left a lasting legacy in the field.

The award, symbolising excellence and commitment to rural upliftment, comes with a cash prize of Rs 10 lakh, a citation and trophy, and is given annually by the Nayyar Foundation for Social and Economic Purpose to individuals below 40 years in age. PTI GJS VJ MIN

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