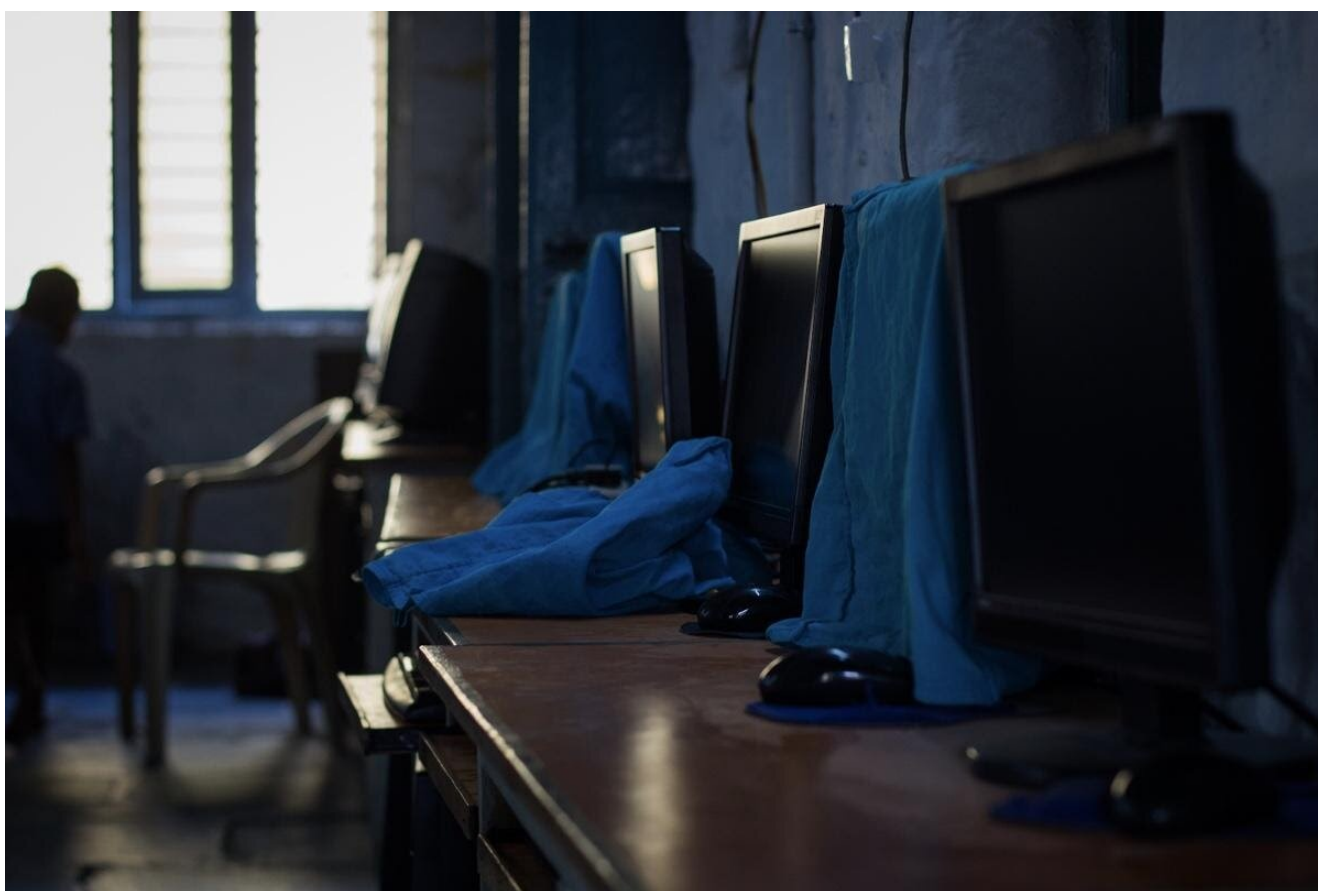


Rural Edtech: Partnerships For Progress

This article is part of our Rural Reset series, where we evaluate forward-looking, long-term solutions to the issues and challenges facing the people of rural India. Check out our [LinkedIn page](#) every Wednesday to find proposals for innovative solutions in the areas of education, gender and livelihoods.





Every day it seems we spend more and more of our lives in front of a screen. While technology already played a large

role in our daily lives pre-COVID, the pandemic has accelerated the entry of technology into many sectors, and education in particular. Practically overnight, digital technologies moved from a supplementary classroom aid to the forum through which the entirety of instruction is performed in many areas.

A uniquely positioned solution

Rural school systems suffer from a plethora of problems, many of which edtech is uniquely positioned to address. First, there is a massive teacher shortage in rural India. A report from 2016 showed that there are [97,273 single-teacher schools](#) across the country, accounting for approximately 8.8% of total schools. This shortage contributes to many of the gaps in educational attainment in rural schools, with [more than 50%](#) of students in 5th standard classes unable to read a second standard textbook or solve basic mathematical questions. Such issues also contribute to the [higher than average dropout rates](#) among rural students.

Edtech solutions have the power to alleviate many of the issues plaguing rural schools. Through the use of multimedia screens, videos and other interactive teaching tools, teachers can more effectively engage their students and explain learning material. Digital edtech can also help overcome geographic barriers to education, by allowing teachers to engage remotely across multiple locations simultaneously. This does not mean that edtech is a “cure-all” for struggling rural school systems. However, these solutions can give schools a leg up on providing quality education to their students.

Current state of Edtech in rural areas

Educational technology, or edtech, can take many forms. From

virtual teaching platforms, to open-source curriculum databases, to online test prep software, edtech solutions promise to make learning more flexible and fruitful. However, without the proper investment in rural areas, edtech risks becoming a solution that only benefits those with the means to take advantage of it.





However, to seize upon the benefits of edtech, one first must be able to access edtech solutions. And as the millions of Indian students currently learning remotely can attest, edtech solutions are only meaningful for those with stable, consistent internet access. On this front, rural India lags severely behind. [Estimates](#) from the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India show only about 25% of rural communities currently have access to broadband internet services. The growing availability of rural data services has been able to supplement some of this deficit. However, widespread access to broadband, as well as computers and other devices, will be required before rural areas can take full advantage of edtech in schools.

Why are Public-Private Partnerships the way forward?

Many traditional government funding schemes have been proposed to expand access to both broadband and thus edtech. As part of the larger Digital India initiative, the government has launched the [‘E-Kranti’ program](#) to aid in the provision of basic infrastructural set-up for internet services in remote and rural areas. And while these programs show promise to expand access in the long-term, newer models of investment can make an immediate difference.

Public-private partnerships (PPP) between Indian IT companies and rural social sector actors have the potential to totally up-root the edtech ecosystem in rural India. Through decades of on-ground work, Indian educational NGOs have built relationships and field infrastructure in rural communities across the country. However, they often lack the sustainable investment and expertise to leverage these networks into significant edtech interventions. This is where IT companies come in. By matching the NGOs knowledge of their communities, with the IT companies vast technical resources, the two groups

can build thorough, effective edtech interventions with the power to make meaningful change in rural schools. These partnerships can take on many forms. In some areas, internet service providers (ISPs) can work to expand broadband infrastructure to serve as the backbone to edtech interventions. In other areas, the provision of laptops and other internet-enabled devices, or the development of online curriculum can be done on the part of the IT companies.

Though the form will depend on the partners, public-private partnerships serve to benefit both rural communities and the partners themselves. [65% of India's families](#) currently live in rural areas. Through a sustained investment in rural areas, IT companies have the ability to bring millions of children into the formal employment sector. This not only improves the economic outlook of India at large, but also expands the companies' talent recruitment pool for future employees.





Examples of Partnerships

Learn, Out of the Box: This program was launched as part of a partnership between the Vodafone Foundation and Pratham Education Foundation. The main aim is to use technology as a teaching tool for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Vodafone has provided 'WebBox' kits that consist of a smartphone, keyboard, data SIM cards and AV cables and software to transform classrooms into "smartclasses" for 50,000 kids across 12 states.

Google and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE): Google recently announced a partnership with the CBSE to enable 1 million teachers to use online learning tools such as GSuite for education, Google Classroom and more in their classrooms. This investment will be part of a larger \$10 billion dollar investment in the digital future of India.

Conclusion

Edtech is no longer an optional tool to enhance teaching. In a post-COVID world, it is an imperative. Students in classrooms that are unable to utilize technology, and thus many students in rural areas, risk being left behind as the world of education moves increasingly online. Innovative public-private partnerships between education NGOs and Indian IT companies can harness the capabilities of both actors to amplify their total impact. When it comes to rural edtech, private-sector partnerships are a pathway to progress.