

EDUCATION EXPRESS JUMPS TRACK, BRINGS KIDS JOY

Remote Malkangiri's first 'train' halts at local school

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Koraput: The Malyabanta Express has arrived in remote Malkangiri and 13-year-old Lachmi Madkami is ecstatic. So what if there's no rail link to connect one of Odisha's most dangerous districts, home to deep forests and deadly Maoist activity. The 'train' has now stopped at her school and Lachmi and her friends hop in and out of it at will, often many times a day.

Most school children in this impoverished swathe of eastern India had never seen a train before, too poor as they have been for decades to travel out to the cities. That's when one government school decided to take matters in its own hands. The Government Nodal Upper Primary School in the district's Chittrakonda block has done up its building to resemble a train, using funds from a scheme called Building as Learning Aid (BaLA). The school's walls are in shades of blue, just like a real train, and doors lead to classrooms. The school calls itself Malyabanta Express. 'Malyabanta' refers to the contiguous tribal belt in Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh.

The makeover of the 90-year-old school, with 13 teachers and 620 students, came about after it was enlisted in the government's BaLA project. The job was completed on August 20, and it has left the students dazzled.

"I had never seen a train before. I now know what one looks like. It's so beautiful," gushed Ram Khemendu, a class VII student. Lachmi added, "I would only seen a train in



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Hindi films. But now it seems like a real train has entered our campus."

Under BaLA, government schools are reimagined in such a way that the building itself serves as a learning tool. The innovative concept aims at qualitative improvement in education. It's fun and child-friendly. In several Indian states now through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Odisha decided to implement the project last year and was granted Rs 10 lakh each for 31 schools in 30 districts by the Centre.

Headmaster Prakash Chandra Nayak said he wanted something novel for the children. Happy with Malyabanta Express, students now want the real deal. "It is unfortunate that even seven decades after Independence, our district has not been covered by the Railways," a student, said. "We need a real train."