



ONLINE OBSTACLES. Sri Lankan students attend their online classes from a treehouse (top photo) on a mountain in a reserve forest in Lunugala, Sri Lanka, and while sitting on tree branches (bottom photo) in the village of Bibila, Sri Lanka. Climbing rocks and sitting on tree tops is not part of their curriculum, but children in villages surrounding the capital city are doing just that to be able to catch mobile signals to access online classes. The digital divide fuelled by uneven internet access and high data cost has forced many students out of the formal education system in Sri Lanka. (AP Photos/Eranga Jayawardena)

In Sri Lanka, a dangerous climb for online school

By Eranga Jayawardena
The Associated Press

BOHITIYAWA, Sri Lanka — Getting online school lessons for residents of a remote Sri Lankan village requires a trek through dense bushes sometimes visited by leopards and elephants.

The teachers and about 45 schoolchildren in Bohitiyawa then climb more than 2 miles to the top of a rock to find an internet signal.

Information technology teacher Nimali Anuruddhika uses the signal to upload lessons for her students who haven't been able to go to school because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The students who also live in the village make the same climb to download online lessons sent to them by their teachers.

Not all have mobile devices or laptops, with four or five children sharing one device.

Their parents, most of whom are farmers, often accompany their children. H.M. Pathmini Kumari, who accompanies his sixth-grade son, said the children climb the rock twice a day and their safety is a big concern for parents.

The village in the central-eastern part of the island country lacks basic amenities, and its children had been studying in a government school, now closed, that is



about 10 miles away.

In the village of Lunugala, about 37 miles away, adults escort schoolchildren to a mountaintop treehouse in a forest reserve. It's about 30 feet high and has internet access. They take turns uploading their homework and downloading lesson plans.

Schools in Sri Lanka have been closed for the most part since March 2020.

Authorities say they make every effort to provide all children access to education, but Joseph Stalin, who heads the Ceylon Teachers' Union, says at most 40% of the country's 4.3 million students can participate in online classes. The majority lack access to devices or connectivity.

Sri Lanka's government has also begun a campaign to vaccinate all teachers with a view to reopening schools soon.

Pandemic leaves Indians mired in massive medical debts

By Krutika Pathi and Yirmiyah Arthur
The Associated Press

NEW DELHI — As coronavirus cases ravaged India this spring, Anil Sharma visited his 24-year-old son Saurav at a private hospital in northwest New Delhi every day for more than two months. In May, as India's new COVID-19 cases broke global records to reach 400,000 a day, Saurav was put on a ventilator.

The sight of the tube running into Saurav's throat is seared in Sharma's mind. "I had to stay strong when I was with him, but immediately after, I would break down as soon as I left the room," he said.

Saurav is home now, still weak and recovering. But the family's joy is tempered by a mountain of debt that piled up while he was sick.

Life has been tentatively returning to normal in India as new coronavirus cases have fallen. But millions are embroiled in a nightmare of huge piles of medical bills. Most Indians don't have health insurance and costs for COVID-19 treatment have them drowning in debt.

Sharma exhausted his savings on paying for an ambulance, tests, medicine, and an ICU bed. Then he took out bank loans.

As the costs mounted, he borrowed from friends and relatives. Then, he turned to strangers, pleading online for help on Ketto, an Indian crowdfunding website. Overall, Sharma says he has paid more than \$50,000 in medical bills.

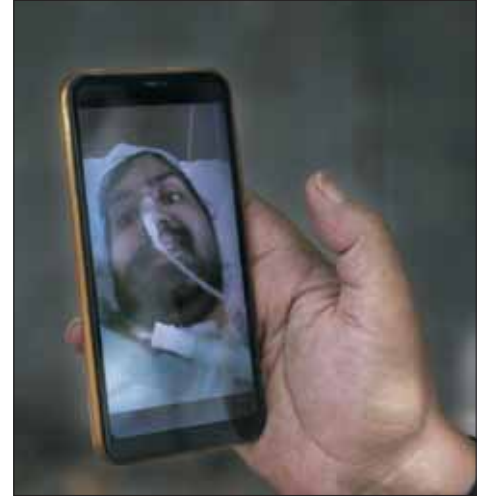
The crowdfunding provided \$28,000, but another \$26,000 is borrowed money he needs to repay, a kind of debt he has never faced before.

"He was struggling for his life and we were struggling to provide him an opportunity to survive," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "I was a proud father — and now I have become a beggar."

The pandemic has devastated India's economy, bringing financial calamity to millions at the mercy of its chronically underfunded and fragmented healthcare system. Experts say such costs are bound to hinder an economic recovery.

"What we have is a patchwork quilt of incomplete public insurance and a poor public health system. The pandemic has shown just how creaky and unsustainable these two things are," said Vivek Dehejia, an economist who has studied public policy in India.

Even before the pandemic, healthcare



CRIPPLING DEBT. Anil Sharma shows a photograph of his son Saurav, who was being treated for COVID-19 at a private hospital in New Delhi, India, on July 1, 2021. Life is tentatively returning to normal in India as coronavirus cases fall. But millions are embroiled in a nightmare of huge piles of medical bills. Most Indians don't have health insurance and costs for COVID-19 treatment have them drowning in debt. "I was a proud father — and now I have become a beggar," says Sharma. (AP Photo/Manish Swarup)

access in India was a problem.

Indians pay about 63% of their medical expenses out-of-pocket. That's typical of many poor countries with inadequate government services. Data on global personal medical costs from the pandemic are hard to come by, but in India and many other countries treatment for COVID is a huge added burden at a time when hundreds of millions of jobs have vanished.

In India, many jobs returned as cities opened up after a severe lockdown in March 2020, but economists worry about the loss of some 12 million salaried positions. Sharma's job as a marketing professional was one of them.

When he asked his son's friends to set up the campaign on Ketto to raise funds, Sharma hadn't seen a paycheck in 18 months. Between April and June this year, 40% of the 4,500 COVID-19 campaigns on the site were for hospitalization costs, the company said.

The pandemic has driven 32 million Indians out of the middle class, defined as those earning \$10 to \$20 a day, according to a Pew Research Center study published in March. It estimated the crisis has increased the number of India's poor — those with incomes of \$2 or less a day — by 75 million.

"If you're looking at what pushes people into debt or poverty, the top two sources

Continued on page 5

Oregon Health Authority recommends universal mask use for all public indoor settings.

In response to a large jump in cases and hospitalizations due to the Delta variant.

This recommendation includes fully vaccinated people.



Oregon Health Authority

For timely updates and to read additional stories, visit <www.facebook.com/TheAsianReporter>. Recent posts include:

- ♦ U.S. virus cases are rising again, doubling over three weeks
- ♦ Olympic surfing exposes whitewashed Native Hawaiian roots
- ♦ Nobel Peace Prize winner says Olympics deserves the award
- ♦ Live at Budokan: Famed arena gets another Olympic spotlight
 - ♦ Manga featured in opening ceremony for Tokyo Olympics
 - ♦ Olympics ceremony uses music from Japanese video games
 - ♦ Tokyo Olympic flame is the first powered by hydrogen
 - ♦ Japan's judoka stars look to calm nation's Olympic angst
- ♦ Unvaccinated snow leopard at San Diego Zoo catches COVID-19
- ♦ Explainer: How a team of refugee athletes made it to the Olympics
 - ♦ "Affecting everything": COVID-19 cracks the tea cup, too

The Asian Reporter is published on the first Monday each month.

News page advertising deadlines for our next three issues are:

September 6, 2021 edition:

Space reservations due: Wednesday, September 1 at 1:00pm
Artwork due: Thursday, September 2 at 1:00pm

October 4, 2021 edition:

Space reservations due: Wednesday, September 29 at 1:00pm
Artwork due: Thursday, September 30 at 1:00pm

November 1, 2021 edition:

Space reservations due: Wednesday, October 27 at 1:00pm
Artwork due: Thursday, October 28 at 1:00pm

For more information, please contact our advertising department at (503) 283-4440.