

## **Institutional Distinctiveness**

Since the inception of the degree programs with the establishment of the college in 2007, the mission of the institution has been to impart education of the tertiary level to the economically and educationally underprivileged student community of this rural area at a minimal cost and easy availability. The founders of the college, being lower middle class lovers of education, dreamt of a centre of higher education close at hand for boys and girls of the nearby villages, who had hitherto to run to distant cities and large, renowned colleges where their chances of entry were very constricted. Furthermore, travelling to these institutions was often beyond the affordability of poor agrarian families where boys had to enter work early, and girls were married off to fend poverty. The founding board of Trustees raised subscriptions from the common masses to purchase land and construct bit by bit. The deemed success of the college was to open before the poverty-stricken youth of the region the economically and physically daunting doors of higher education at costs down to the earth. This deep commitment to the rights of the downtrodden to the light of higher education was instilled into the guiding principle of the college and has become, in one and a half decade of history, its mark of distinctiveness.

In the present period of self-study (2018 – 2023) the institution has passed through a phase of near-extinction in the shape of the Covid-19 pandemic, and its responses to the threats faced and the strategies of survival bear out the distinct dedication to the disadvantaged learner. The pandemic hit the student community at this institution in many ways – the disease, shutdown of rural commerce, loss of small jobs, disintegration of families, panic and psychic debacles. Many families were forced to draw their wards out of education and push them into work of some sort. Those with less economic stress lost motivation to study and began to suffer from mental depression. Destruction was looking in the face, and they failed to see studies as a way of survival. It was at this juncture that the college returned to its committed service to the poor student. While before the pandemic, in 2018-19, the management granted free studentships and fee waivers and transport concessions to economically poor students and arranged for free medical aid in association with the Students' Health Home, 2019-20 saw the teaching staff enter the arena of online education within a few months of the pandemic closures. When all surrounding institutions were still reeling under shock and all academic activity was suspended, the college formed social media groups of students of each semester and year and began circulating study material using them and the college website. By June 2020 a rigorous online class routine was prepared and daylong classes were begun through the week through audiovisual meetings over the

Zoom platform. Online counseling sessions were held to keep students to academic praxis. Text and reference books, notes and study modules prepared by teachers were all provided over the internet for free download and use. For a more comprehensive and academically equipped system, the college shifted within a couple of months to the Google Suite for Education, gaining institutional access to the Google Classroom which has been extensively used since. All this was done to deliver to all students a regular learning activity at no cost within the safety of their homes. Projects and tests were assigned and regularly turned in when students at other institutions were drifting away. Personal level mentoring, tutorial assistance and online talks and webinars were regularly conducted to keep students glued to academics. Moving on to the session 2020-21, it was noted that a section of students were failing to avail of online teaching as they could not afford the electronic device or the internet service necessary. The college gave out the message that those in such difficulty may apply for help and the college authority would pay up the internet expense. On another hand, most of the material in Google Classroom was simultaneously made available on the college website. Apart from institutional support, teachers offered books and material via Classroom and social media. The institutional spirit of standing by the disadvantaged learner was borne out in all this.

As offline activity resumed in November 2021, campus security and hygiene was given utmost importance. Classes began in cascading mode, each semester in alternate schedule, and the boys' and girls' common rooms were refurbished with sanitizing kits – a student-teacher committee was set up to look after campus hygiene. Since the aftermath of the pandemic was long and bitter among the rural, poverty-stricken student base, offline attendance was noted to fall significantly and it was decided to continue online teaching-learning in the same vein as during the closure. As an extended appendage to the institutional commitment of supporting the unprivileged, the library catalogues (OPAC) were made open to remote access through the college website in December 2022 and students were encouraged to study off-campus using their NLIST subscriptions.

All these initiatives, taken in hard times, mark the underlying ideal of staying committed to the needs of the disadvantaged learner that is the distinct character of the institution.