

The Government Primary School (PS) Bamhanpali, Raigarh, Chhattisgarh stands beside a long road that connects Bamhanpali village with the small town of Kharsia. The location of the school is convenient for both, students and teachers. On entering the school, the first thing one sees are the huge mounds of rubble that have been dumped on its premises. Inside the building, students of classes III, IV and V occupy the hall and the students of classes I and II sit in a room beside the hall. Though there is another room, it is not being used as the structure is falling apart - there was an accident during Diwali when the ceiling fan fell, but since the students were on vacation, no one was hurt.

The children who study in this school live in the village Bamhanpali. This village community has a mixed caste structure with mostly members belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC) and Other Backward Class (OBC) categories and a few belonging to tribal communities. The children's parents' occupations vary from farming and fishing to working as migrant labourers (mostly in Mumbai). The children from these migrant workers' families live with their grandparents or other relatives.

The purpose of my visit was to observe the class of Pandey sir, the Head Teacher at the school, who teaches maths and environmental studies. I have had a few conversations with him previously and knew he loves reading books and has spirited discussions around them in his class. His classes usually have a good mix of science and stories. That day, the class (mixed group of classes III, IV, and V) was reading a chapter on *Ants* from *Looking Around*, NCERT Class V, Environmental Studies textbook.

Classroom interaction

Pandey sir started the class with a discussion on the basic information about ants and asked if the children had seen ants around them. As expected, the students responded with a resounding yes! Then they started relating their experiences. One child mentioned that in his house, he sees the big black ants with pincers. Once, one of those bit

him and he had a fever for one day. Another child mentioned that he has seen red ants every time any food is left unattended, and it gets difficult to get rid of them as they bite. Yet another student added that she loves the small black ants as they do not hurt anyone, and it makes her tickle when one lands on her and starts crawling.

Pandey sir listened to every word they said and sometimes joined the conversation to encourage every student to share their thoughts. Next, he moved on to the chapter and started reading from the textbook. After every section, he would pause and ask the children if they were following what he was reading. If there were any queries, he answered them. At the end of the chapter, the children were a bit confused about the anatomy of an ant, they were comparing it with the human body and could not understand how an ant with six legs along the length of the body could function. Pandey sir proposed that the next day, they would look at an ant under the microscope to help them better understand the anatomy of an ant. This suggestion brought a roar of approval as the students got excited to be able to use a microscope.

While all this was happening, one student was talking animatedly with her friend, and they were engrossed in their conversation. Pandey sir noticed this and asked them to share what they were talking about. The student got up but hesitated to speak. When she spoke, she shared that in her community, they also ate ants. She looked around anxiously wondering how her classmates would react to this unusual practice. But before her classmates could say anything, Pandey sir called her to the front of the class, and then he mentioned to the class that ants are also a great source of protein and many people consume them. He then asked the girl to explain how they cook and eat ants. She shared that they first collect ants and then grind them with salt and chilli powder because if they do not do so, it can cause fever. After grinding them, they make the ground paste into balls, fry and eat them. Pandey sir then asked what happens if they get a fever after consuming ants, and the girl replied if

that happens, they just sleep with a wet cloth over their head for the night and the fever usually goes away by the next morning. The class ended with this.

Reflection

A pivotal moment in the classroom occurred when a student shared her cultural practice of consuming ants, and instead of dismissing the practice, Pandey sir seized the opportunity to explore the cultural significance of the practice, thereby fostering respect for diverse cultural identities within the classroom from an early stage. This inclusive attitude aligns with the principles of multicultural education, which advocates the celebration of diversity and the promotion of different cultural experiences among students.

P.S. Bamhanpali and Pandey sir exemplify the resilience of educators in fostering inclusive learning environments. The school embraces a philosophy of inclusivity, striving to accommodate the diverse needs of its students.

In essence, my experience at P.S. Bamhanpali reaffirms my belief in the transformative potential of inclusive education. By embracing diversity,

promoting equity, and fostering a culture of inclusion, we can create a holistic learning environment where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential. Through ongoing commitment and collaboration, we can continue to build inclusive learning communities that celebrate diversity and promote the holistic development of all students.

By removing barriers and encouraging equal opportunities, inclusive practices cultivate a sense of belonging and acceptance among students from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and abilities. This celebration of diversity nurtures empathy, understanding, and respect among students, contributing to the foundation of a more inclusive and unified society.

Additionally, inclusive practices play a fundamental role in reducing stigma and discrimination, they challenge stereotypes, and create a more inclusive environment for all, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive.

A positive classroom culture is essential for student learning as it creates an environment where students feel safe, supported, and motivated to engage actively in the learning process.



Ananya Banerjee is a Resource Person at Azim Premji Foundation, Raipur, Chhattisgarh. Prior to this role, she was teaching in the Department of Sociology, St. Xavier's College, Bardhaman, West Bengal. Her academic background comprises an MPhil in Sociology, and she has a keen interest in conducting field-based research in the domain of education. She may be reached at ananya.banerjee@azimpremjifoundation.org