

# Everyone has an Equal Right to Learn

Vishnu Gopal

It is unjust to assign any game, task, or process based on people's identities. Despite our awareness of this fact, such instances frequently occur in schools. This is a significant challenge to inclusion. Its impact is evident on children's learning as well. Acknowledging these challenges and taking proactive measures to resolve them is the first step toward fostering inclusion.

Sports is generally considered a boys' activity. Girls do not play with boys, nor are they allowed to. Similarly, tasks, like cooking, serving food, cleaning utensils, etc., have been perceived as girls' work. If boys do such tasks, they are ridiculed. And when such tasks are to be done by a group comprising boys from all socio-economic classes – tribal, Dalit, and the rest, the issue becomes even more complicated. Not only do boys typically not do the cooking, but even if they are willing, there arises a problem with some of them refusing to cook with Dalit or tribal boys. To build a better, democratic society, it is the responsibility of schools to address these issues while adhering to constitutional values and principles. One such value and principle is that of inclusion.

The Gramin Shiksha Kendra (GSK) is based in Rajasthan's Sawai Madhopur and Tonk districts and works with the communities to improve their educational status. The main programme of the organisation is *Uday*, which focuses on community-based schools set up to demonstrate quality education to the community and the other schools.

The two schools run by GSK focus on inclusion. In these schools, efforts are being made to ensure inclusion through

both systemic reforms and continuous engagement with children, ensuring the equal participation of children and teachers from all communities in the school assembly, organising classroom seating arrangements, daily activities, and so on. The results of these efforts are gradually becoming visible. Our observation has been that collective activities, such as playing, cooking, and eating together, accelerate the pace of inclusion.

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## Introduction of playing together

Playing together started with the introduction of indoor games, like *Carrom* and *Ludo*. When boys and girls were given the playing materials, we observed that the girls partnered with other girls and the boys with other boys.



Figures 1 & 2: Boys rolling out rotis and girls cooking together in the school.



Figure 3. Girls and boys playing a game together.

The next day, instead of forcing the boys and girls to sit together, I arranged smaller groups for them. These groups included both boys and girls, but a new problem arose. No one sat with the tribal or Dalit children, whether they were boys or girls. When asked why, they explained that they would not play with Dalits or Adivasis, whether they were boys or girls. This was also observed during lunchtime and while drinking water from the common tap. Since there was only one tap, children from the general category would wash it many times before drinking water. Among the girls, this feeling was even stronger. And why would it not be, given that they are constantly instructed about purity and identity? There was a sense of superiority based on caste and gender among these children. Children from the backward and Dalit categories kept their distance due to an unknown fear or past experiences. Even when I asked them to join, they refused and kept a distance from me as well. I realised that the process of inclusion had to begin with me and that I also needed to involve the other teachers. I also thought that the assembly needed to be conducted differently.

### Changes in morning assembly

While making changes in the assembly, I started having the children sit in a circle instead of in rows. No one occupied a seat in front of or behind another; they sat in an 'equal' arrangement. I also sat with the children.

Every child would call me to sit beside them and if I did not go, they would come and argue to sit next to me. So, I began changing my place every day, sitting alternately with boys and girls from all categories, talking to them, and singing with them. This gave me the opportunity to engage in the conversations that were happening among them.

### Participation in social occasions

One day, I learnt that one of my Dalit students had a wedding ceremony at his house. I decided to go, even though his parents had not invited me. I did not want to miss this opportunity. So, I said to the child, 'There's a wedding at your home, and I wasn't even invited?'

The child looked at me and, without saying anything, went home. After a while, his father came. He apologised very politely and said, 'Guruji, you know who we are. It was because of that fear that we didn't dare to invite you.'

I managed the situation quickly by saying, 'So, have you come to invite me or not?' He hesitated for a moment, but then, composing himself, said, 'Come, Guruji!' I started to leave, but my fellow teachers did not even move. Although everyone unanimously supports inclusion in training and speeches, they stopped short when an actual situation arose. It was important from an educational perspective that they accompany me. Only after I insisted did they come along. The house was right in front of the school,

so we reached there quickly. Everyone recognised us and started greeting us with 'Namaste'. Separate mats and utensils were arranged for us to sit and eat. But I made it clear that we would either eat with everyone, or not at all. They had to agree to my request, and we ate with everyone else.

This incident had a significant impact on Dalit children who from the very next day began to feel more at ease in the school. We held a discussion session and talked about this issue. The children had not yet internalised the caste (*varna*) system to the extent that they would dismiss reason and logic. They began to sit, talk, and study together. Regular discussions were held for this. Discussions would often involve debates about vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, along with the beliefs associated with them. Sometimes, arguments around *karma*, caste, occupation, food, and cleanliness would get all mixed up, and we would have to organise separate discussions for each topic. However, touching or pushing each other playfully, and eating together was still not happening. For that, we thought of introducing some games.

### The game of 'namaste-namaste'

In this game, all the children sit in a circle. One child who is outside the circle pats the back of any one child and begins to run. The child who receives the pat gets up and runs in the opposite direction. The two children meet at a point, shake hands and greet each other with a 'namaste'. Then, they race to sit in the vacant spot. The child who reaches first takes the place and the other repeats the process. By the end of this game, we saw that all the boys and girls had touched each other and shaken hands. In their eagerness to reach first, they forgot everything else. Later, even if someone remembered, they gave more importance to the enjoyment they got from the game. We also played other popular group games, like *Choocha Daur Billii Aayi*, *Koda Hai Jamalshahi*, and *Kho-Kho*. As they played these games, the children's desire to participate and win grew stronger. They forgot everything else and focused on improving their skills. To perform better, they started forming stronger teams. Whether the team members were Dalit, Adivasi, or from any other background, did not matter to them anymore.

### Eating together

The atmosphere had improved a little but during lunchtime, only a few children brought food from home. Some children, whose homes were nearby, would go back home for lunch, some others did not bring food at all. We asked everyone to bring lunch. I spoke to the parents whose children did not bring food to school, but nothing changed. I started having lunch with the children. I decided that I would take one bite from everyone's tiffin,

which was enough to fill me up, and I would give my tiffin to those who did not bring lunch. Seeing this, some children started bringing extra rotis. Gradually, having lunch together and sharing food, familiarity among the children from different communities began to grow.

Along with regular games, we started a kitchen garden and a cooking club. The children would bring compost, seeds, pesticides, tools, etc., from their homes for the kitchen garden that we created in a vacant lot in the school. They would work together to prepare the soil. The fruits and vegetables from this garden were available to everyone and when there was a surplus, the children could even take some home. From there, we began working on their food habits while running the cooking club. This was the time when the children while learning how to use a wood stove, utensils, and even making salads, took the initiative to cook.

In the tasks of serving food, feeding, and cleaning dishes, the boundaries between caste and class slowly faded away without the children even realising it. Watching the children behave naturally, the parents also stopped scolding them. Occasionally, parents would complain to us, but their complaints lacked firmness and were more out of their conditioning. We would simply tell them, 'Times are changing. You have lived your life, but these children have much further to go.'

While the parents accepted the school system, the rules at home remained unchanged. They were not ready for any changes at home. Since these matters were outside our scope, we continued to work with the new generation within the school.



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### Some other efforts

In the daily activities, studying, eating, and playing, being together had become normal. The children were no longer just children; they were transitioning into adolescence. They started participating in various sports events and competitions based on their age groups and gender outside the school. However, we were never able to send mixed-gender teams for these competitions.

Some improvements in these schools regarding inclusion were possible because we made changes by constantly adjusting and analysing daily experiences. One such change occurred when due to the school's excellent

results, the number of boys started increasing. Prominent people began using their influence to get their children admitted to our school. At that point, we organised meetings with the school management committee and the community, and with everyone's consent, we reserved 50 percent of the seats for girls. Not only that, but we also decided to admit all boys and girls within a 500-meter radius of the school. This decision ensured a hundred percent enrolment of children from the nearby Muslim, nomadic, and Dalit communities.

By using peer learning and multi-grade, multi-level teaching methods, we worked to increase opportunities for children to help each other, learn together, and collaborate. As a result, the children became less dependent on the teachers. They were building better understanding and connections by cooperating. To resolve



Figure 4. Children forget all the differences when they play together.

conflicts, we formed a student council to address issues through collective discussions. This allowed the children to gain practical experience in building and managing their democratic systems.

*Translated from Hindi by Eklavya, Bhopal*



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