

The lone school teacher helping bend the arc of history

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Photo: PTI

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Here's evidence from a remote village of what extraordinary dedication to keep students learning can do

The temple is on the northern tip of the ridge, the school perched on the south. Climb up the slope just short of the temple, take a detour to the top of the ridge, and then walk 200 metres on the 18-inch-wide cemented path from the temple, and it becomes clear why the school is located there. That southern tip of the ridge is the only piece of sizeable level land amid the Deodar tree-lined sharp slopes at that altitude of about 2,000 metres above mean sea level.

Halfway down that cement path, I heard rushing footsteps behind me. The little girl stopped mid-stride as I turned back towards her; the teacher stopped too, she was some 20 metres behind the girl. "*Waapas aayoge?*" she asked. Will you come back? "*Waapas aanaa,*" you must come back, she said. Unlikely as it was that I would ever return to that school, I just laughed. "*Kyaa karogi?*" I asked. What will you do? "*Ghar le jaaongi, murgi-chaawal khilaoongi,*" I will take you home and feed you chicken-rice.

The teacher called her back. She clapped her hands, laughed, turned, and then ran back to the school. I waved a farewell to the teacher, turned, and walked towards the temple, and then down to the car to drive away from the woods.

The teacher takes the same road every day, a 45-minute ride in a shared cab up and down those steep slopes. To home where her elderly mother waits. Her daughter is in a good college in a city on the plains. Both of whom she has cared for on her own since her husband passed away almost two decades ago. When she was posted to this public school a few years ago, it had nine students from the adjoining

village. In a couple of years, that number rose to 17, as all children moved to her school, abandoning the private school in a town in the valley below that would send cabs to pick them up.

Students increased as the years passed, belying the trend of that area—of student numbers dropping in schools because of migration-driven reductions in village populations. The explanation was simple. Nearby villages heard of what she was doing at the school and started sending their children to her. Some of these villages were 3 kilometres away, an hour's trek one way in those mountains. Villages there are small. A village with only 10-15 kids in the primary school age-group is common. There were 39 students in her school when I visited. All the students, from classes 1 to 5, were in one classroom, since she was the only teacher.

Their teacher was very cruel and bad, we had been informed, I told them, and that is why we were visiting the school. The howls of protest didn't stop till I admitted I was lying. Our one-hour conversation with the children was fun. It is a clear marker of a school or class where there is no climate of fear, instead, affection between teacher and students.

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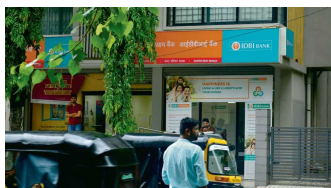
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Systematically, we explored what the children could and could not do in Math and Language. We discovered the average distribution; some children were at a level which was appropriate for their age, some were behind, and a few far behind. The teacher had none of the diffidence that you often encounter when an outsider starts discovering how exactly the students are faring. The average distribution of learning levels in this school is anything but the average today in Indian schools. Most children are nowhere near where they should be. By now, there is widespread acknowledgement of this massive loss of learning because of the covid-driven shutdown of schools for almost two years. That her students are at the levels they are is therefore very unusual.

The pandemic-ravaged country's schools stayed shut for almost 2 years. But other than the first two months of the shock lockdown in 2020, she continued to go to the villages. Up the slopes, into the woods. Every day. The school was shut, but she would teach the kids in groups. In a courtyard in one village, under a tree in another. It was impossible to compensate for full school time, but the education of the children continued methodically for all those months. This, even as most kids across India had no educational engagement or only had ineffective online classes.

No wonder the learning loss of her students is so minimal. Still, she is worried. By her estimate, her students have lost a lot. She thinks it will take about a year to get all children up to levels that they should be at. She is also concerned that she is not able to participate in training sessions to learn how to recover lost learning, because she cannot leave her mother alone at home.

She has no conception of the extraordinary. Neither in what she had done for the past two decades, nor in what she has set out to do. She is doing what she can, whatever is required, in the changing reality that she faces. Her empathy nurtures her, attracting the deep affection of her students, the respect of the villages around and the solidarity of many good people.

What can a woman do alone? Just going about her life. Committing only what she has—her hand, head, and heart.

She can change the world; not aiming to, but changing it anyway. Million acts of such ordinariness bend the arc of history to justice, equity, and humanness. Each in the final count, extraordinary.

With the ridge receding as we drove away, from a bend in the road we could see its full expanse. The temple at the north tip, and another at the south tip—probably holier. A temple built not by and for an idol, but by and for a life of dharma.

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