

Opinion | Life lessons from the school of hard knocks

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The crimson sun set on the sand dunes of Chohthan. All its hues yesterday were the same as five years ago. I had never seen the sun set in the sand dunes before. The temperature dropped by 10 degrees in 30 minutes. The colour of the sand changed every minute with the sinking sun. But the reds of neither the sand nor sky matched the palette of red in the pagadi (turban) Satyapal Singh had given me.

That day five years ago, I had gone to the public (government) school 7 km from Chohthan, where Singh was the teacher. We had just begun working in the district of Barmer. Chohthan with a population of 12,000 is the headquarters of a block in the district. I listed the warnings that we had received about Barmer in Jaipur.

It was called ‘kala paani’. The terrain so hard, the heat so scorching, the poverty so wrenching, and the water so absent, that no one but the desert-natives could live there. Singh laughed and said all that was true... but the last. Then he added “yahan log rote hue aate hain, aur rote hue jaate hain (“people move to Barmer unwillingly, but leave equally unwillingly). Because Barmer may have nothing, but its people have big hearts.”

When we were leaving Singh’s school, they wanted to put a pagadi on my head. They had one each for my colleagues Shobhan and Gautam, too. Ramphal, while a member of our team, seemed to be equally theirs, so there was none for him. We refused to take the pagadi. He stamped out our arguments by saying “the pagadi will be the responsibility on your head, for working with us to help improve the schools here”.

Singh was there yesterday too. It was a workshop on developing teaching-learning material (TLM) in maths from whatever resources were available to the schools. Through the two-day workshop, the 25 teachers developed a bagful of such TLM to take back. During the closing debrief in the evening, Singh pointed out that even after two days of hard work, the teachers didn’t want to leave. Another teacher mentioned that the most important thing that they had learnt was that they had innumerable resources around them to make learning effective and exciting for their students. Meagre budgets did not have to be a limitation.

Battling the physical conditions of the desert, while taking care of all aspects of their schools—many of the teachers alone with 30 to 40 students—is hard work. The 25 teachers’ faces and physiques reflect their toil. But their spirit is resplendent like the

crimson sun. As it is in each school that I had visited in the previous four days. The tenacity of these teachers in the face of every conceivable challenge is epic. A few lines can be no more than a blurb for these epics. Let me share three.

Moolaram and I met for the third time in three years. Each time, he was the head teacher of a different school. The frequent transfers have left not a mark on him. But he has left each school much improved. Teachers from all around seek him out for advice. I had been to this school before Moolaram.

The one-acre campus in the sand was sparkling earlier as now, but the learning of students has transformed. After the tiger ate seven of the 23 goats in the village and I bought 13 more goats, how many goats were there? Children in second class find that question very hard, even with pen and paper. These kids answered this and many more orally. He works with each teacher to make this happen, he is a master-teacher.

Ganesharam and Mahesh run a good school but they didn't think this was enough. They decided to learn English so that they could teach English. I hadn't heard English for three days in Barmer, till I heard the class four children speak in that school. They are far from fluent, but for students of two teachers who themselves started learning English this year, it was a marvel. They have built an oasis in the school, a grove of neem trees with 50 happy, fearless children. As we were leaving, Ganesharam pointed to his own house across the blazing dunes; he must live in his karmabhumi—a word with no accurate English equivalent.

A different Moolaram has been a teacher for four years. He is the lone teacher in the school, teaching 56 students three subjects across five classes. Like the other schools, his students battle life in poverty every day.

Along with education, the school is a succour to the children and their families. Every month, part of his salary is spent on the school. All alone that he is, he craves to learn from others. He has bought a bike recently. Earlier, he would walk miles, to meet other teachers. He says 'mushkilen ginaane se kam nahi hoti' (counting difficulties doesn't reduce them). His wisdom rests easily on his slight frame and youth, with roots in experiences of his tough and driven life.

When the terrain is so hard, the heat so scorching, the poverty so wrenching, and the water so absent, all that's left is the human spirit. And that fills every breach, tends every heart, and keeps bodies together. These are not just schools, but crucibles from which faith in humanity comes out forged every day. The crimson sun is just one part of the intimate beauty of Barmer. If you go there, you will not leave willingly. When you do, it will be with a bit of faith in humanity restored.

Anurag Behar is the chief executive officer of Azim Premji Foundation and leads the sustainability initiatives for Wipro Ltd. He writes every fortnight on issues of ecology and education. Read Anurag's previous Mint columns at www.livemint.com/othersphere

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