

# Opinion | A fraying lifeline for India's deprived children

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Tombstones for the young, without graves. Each a foot tall, clustered closely together. About half carved with black cobras, for the boys who died young. The other half colourful, for the girls who died young. Every phala has such a shrine. Phalas are hamlets of the Bhil in south western Rajasthan. The Bhil call these shrines wadi.

Gautam and I drove from Dungarpur to Chittorgarh in four days, crossing the districts of Pratapgarh and Banaswara. We kept crossing phala after phala, with many wadis visible from the road. The same thought occurred to both of us. Even the bigger phalas don't have a population of more than 200-300 people. How could so many young have died? There were just too many tombstones.

This trip was no different from others, visiting schools and meeting teachers. On the morning of the second day, the school that we visited was strikingly neat and clean. It had two classrooms, 50 students, two teachers and a large 2 acre playground. The wadi was visible at one edge inside the school compound.

I sat on the floor with the children. Their limbs were as thin as sticks, their hair discoloured and brittle. Their meagre frames made them look half their age. Used as I am to seeing deprivation and poor nutrition embodied in public school children, this school was extreme. The children spoke Bhili, which I don't understand. But with the smattering of Hindi they spoke, gestures, and laughs, we got along fine. And as the class was ending, the teacher asked the children, "Kaun kaun roti khaa ke aaya hai?" Who has eaten before coming? Only about 20% of the children in the class raised their hands.

It was 11 in the morning, and it was unclear whether the question referred to breakfast that morning, or dinner the previous night. In the best case scenario, the 80% that had not raised their hands had eaten dinner. Even so, they had eaten nothing since. But it actually seemed that many may not have had dinner the previous night either. Their last meal may well have been the mid-day meal provided by the school the previous day. My colleagues who visit the school often told me that the schools' food is as good as possible with the ₹ 5 per child per day budget that is given to the school. The school's two teachers and the cook take special care of what to make, often putting in money from their own pocket.

We went to another school about 20 km away in the afternoon. The school had organized a 'Metric Mela'—a fair to explain the concepts related to physical measurement. Outside, the October sun was scorching, but inside, the school was buzzing. Groups of children had

set up 12 stalls inside the five classrooms. The stalls had simple apparatus to measure different physical quantities, ranging from length to weight and volume. Gautam's height was beyond the scale that the kids had constructed and led to much merriment. I methodically interrogated the two groups who were weighing vegetables and people. They passed all my arithmetic tests and even the conceptual one about 'least count'. Then they made a bet about my weight. I gave them a ludicrous number of 300 kg and lost. The mela was the result of weeks of effort by the teachers of the school. It was not only a celebration, but an integral element of an effective pedagogical approach.

The children in this school seemed to have the same level of nutritional deprivation as in most disadvantaged parts of the country—very severe, but not as extreme. The teachers told us that the phala nearby had irrigated land and was better off than other phalas in the vicinity. In contrast, the children visiting the mela from other schools stood out. Their emaciated bodies spoke starkly of extreme deprivation, as in the school with the wadi in the playground. But in both cases, hunger was chronic.

How can education happen with an empty stomach every day? Years of deprivation that have led to severe developmental effects, including on the brain. This is combined with perilous health and homes that are forever precarious—not because of any less love or sense of community, but just because of dire poverty.

The challenges that teachers in these places face are unfathomable, because the challenges these children face in life are unfathomable for most of us. We need not have been surprised by the number who died young. The school with a wadi is a poignant metaphor for this life, always on the edge of precipice of survival. The school's midday meal is a lifeline in this world.

The ₹ 5 per child spent on the midday meal may well be the most important public investment and safety net in many parts of the country such as these. Despite its operational inefficiencies and incidents of graft, the midday meal scheme does work for about 120 million children across the country. But it is just not enough. What can you feed a child with ₹ 5, when that is the only real meal she has? The norms on nutrition are clear, the Supreme Court has also weighed in on this matter. More money is what is desperately required to make it happen. The current total annual public expenditure on the scheme is about ₹ 14,000 crore. Doubling that amount will not dent public finances; the amount is just about 3% of the total public expenditure only on education. All we need is the will to do this.

We have figured out a lifeline for these children. It is thin and fraying, but it is there. All we need to do is to strengthen it.

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