

Making the country a safer place for children

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On that dark day the mountains loomed high, merging into the black clouds. The steady rain did not belong to April, it was from mid-monsoon. The Bhagirathi was a sheer drop of 400m, from the right edge of the loose gravel road. On the left, the road hugged a cliff, a grey wall of flaky mud.

The rain was washing the mud down the cliff, on to the road and into the river. We didn't seem to be in danger, but it appeared that the road would get blocked by the sliding mud, by the time of our return journey. That would force us to take another route, 3 hours down river, to cross the next bridge, and then 4 hours back to return to Uttarkashi.

We decided not to take that risk by continuing. Instead, we turned back. We had to skip the visit to the school at Chhoti Mani.

The road wound down to the bridge nearby, we crossed it, and turned downriver toward Chinayalisaur. We were now just across the river from where we had turned back. That spot was a speck on the over 1,000m-tall cliff of slipping mud. The ribbon of the road itself was not visible against the grey background and the low light. The foolhardiness of having tried to drive on that stretch, in those conditions, was apparent from this side of the river. It made everything even darker.

We now had time on our hands, so we stopped by the government primary school in Badethi. Sanjay Kuksaal, the head teacher, was an old acquaintance of my colleagues Sanjay and Jagmohan. He was preoccupied with uploading some data on the DISE (District Information System for Education) website. He welcomed us warmly while continuing his work. We did not want to interrupt him, so we asked him if we could talk to some of his students. He suggested that we go to class IV, since the teacher was out for training and the students were studying on their own.

Jagmohan went in to the class with me. There were 14 children—an equal number of boys and girls. Predictably, the second question they asked us was where our homes were. This led to our asking where their homes were. That question can be one of the most difficult for some, as it seemed to be for one boy. That this was an unusual class was apparent from the early banter, but the way the class rallied around the boy, in answering that question, pulled at me even across the depth of darkness I was in.

The boy was from a distant state. That this was the reason for part of his discomfort, we understood. But there was more, which we did not want to get into. After his first hesitant statement, his friends did not let him speak, at least five of them saying, in their own words, "He is one of us, his home is here." He smiled, and all was well.

When girls and boys sit together, mixed up and not separately, it is usually a sign of a better school. The banter continued. I told them I was 98 years old, and they rolled over with laughter. Then they guessed my age to be anywhere between 40 and 45. They asked Jagmohan his age. He said his age was five years less than half of my stated age. In an instant, they figured out his age. That is remarkable for class IV in any school. To be able to solve a math problem posed in that abstract a manner, in an educational culture that only teaches procedural skills, speaks of the quality of the school.

When leaving, I told them that they were very smart. They responded, "You are very smart, sir," and then they turned to Jagmohan and said, "You are also very smart, sir"—they did not want to make him feel excluded.

An hour that could have only brightened life, deepened my darkness. I could only see the little girl from Kathua everywhere. Going by her photograph, she would have fitted well into that class.

I knew the resolution of the tumult in my heart and mind. I knew what to do with the rage that was fuelling the darkness. But knowing what to do is light years away from doing it, and that interaction made it much worse; every moment an excruciating reminder of what she would have been.

We went to see the airport under construction near Chinyalisaur, on a high plateau over the town. Standing on the middle of the runway, I got a call from a friend, "I want to drop all this that I am doing and go to Kathua." What will you do, I asked him. "Maybe hang them," he said. "Jinhe naaz hai Hind pe wo kahan hain," he asked.

Sometimes, giving counsel can be therapeutic. Every day a new depravity haunts us. In just these weeks, we have had Kathua, Unnao, Surat, Bareilly and Muzzafarnagar. Education cannot change and solve all this, but we should fight the fight that we can fight best. Especially when it can make a real difference, even if not all the difference. Our challenge is to harness our rage into our work. We must do a better job with education, and faster. If education can help grow children like the 14 I met, we must go for it. And if children like that are the future of this country, then every little girl may be safer, and perhaps even happy.

I reminded myself and my friend that even the timeless lament of Sahir Ludhianvi from *Pyasaa*, which he quoted, ends with a challenge, not with despair: "jinhe naaz hai Hind pur, unko lao!" It's a challenge to us, "kyonki naaz humme hai Hind par".

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