

The ordinary men and women of India

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Isigned off 2017 with the column **The Continuing Importance Of Being Stubborn**. Ziddi is the word in my heart—the Hindi word’s depth and nuance is not conveyed by the English stubborn.

On a cold night in Jamshedpur recently, at the 25-year reunion of my MBA (master’s in business administration) class at XLRI, a sozzled and close friend drew out a kind of gist of the piece, riffing off Antonio Gramsci. It is about the unrelenting optimism of the will in the miasmatic pessimism of the intellect today. The words are sort of heavy for me, but it certainly is one way of saying it. His question was, “what fuels your optimism, aside from weird genetic wiring?” That question is a great start to 2018.

In 2017, I spent 105 days in the field. That was much like 2016, and will be so again in 2018. That is where the action is. For me, it means the districts across seven states that we work in directly with public schools and their teachers. These are some of the remotest districts in India. From the mountains of Uttarakhand, to the deserts of Rajasthan and dense jungles of Chhattisgarh, and more. On each of these 105 days, I met ordinary people going about their work without any fuss, doing what they think they should be doing. Let me sketch the typical example of such an ordinary person.

At 7am, a woman gets into a jeep cab with 10 other people. She gets off after an hour-long drive on the non-existent roads winding up and down. Then, she climbs on foot for 30 minutes, one of those gorgeous, treacherous slopes in the Garhwal region. She opens the school and checks the provisions for the mid-day meal. With the help of the students who are in early, she cleans the two classrooms, the small play-ground and the toilets. By then, 30 of her 33 students have come in. Two babies have tagged along with their siblings to the school, since there is no one at their homes during the day to take care of them. She starts the morning assembly.

The 30 students vary in age from 6 to 11. She takes five classes simultaneously, teaching Hindi, math and environmental studies (EVS) through the day. She is not comfortable with math. Her subject in college was Hindi, and she has studied math only up to class X. Her BEd (bachelor of education) degree, with its archaic curriculum in a dysfunctional college, was of little help in preparing her to become a teacher. She has learnt to be a good teacher by paying careful attention to each child and participating in every professional development opportunity she can find.

The six-and-a-half-hour school day is a roller coaster, as it would be with any 30 children. A scuffle breaks out among three of them, she sorts it out. The mother of a student shows up and wants to discuss whether she can take her child away for an extra 10 days during the Diwali break. Two eager children are pulling at her sari because they have finished solving the problems she gave them. She wants every child to learn with understanding; she shuns rote memorization in her school. Meanwhile, she has had to arrange for the two babies to be fed. Then she discusses the EVS project that the classes IV and V students have finished. And so on. At 3.30pm, she closes the school.

She is not done yet. She climbs the slope to go to the house of the child who hasn't come to school for three days. She knows that the child is not well. She spends some time with the mother. And then searches out one of the panchayat members of the village, asking him to go and talk to the block education officer, because funds for repairing the toilets are not being released. By the time she reaches the road, the 4.30pm shared cab has left. She reaches home by 6.30pm, to another part of the full life awaiting her.

She has done this for 15 years and will do it for another 20. An ordinary woman doing what she thinks she should be doing. Some days are quieter, some crazier. All spent with children, who learn a bit more every day, the foundation of their life being laid by this ordinary person.

A life of such ordinariness in its full arc is the kind of heroism that upholds the world and animates the progress of humanity. If called heroic, such people shrug and move on, to the next ordinary thing. To be done to the best of their ability. Often in the face of the sclerotic and disempowering culture of the system, with little or no resources, while being the target of blame for the entire country's failings. In 2018, let's listen to these ordinary people on how to improve education in India. Next fortnight, I plan to write the sequel to this piece, called "Every ordinary teacher's wish list for 2018".

Encountering such people, hundreds of them every year, is fuel enough for my optimism.

The 105 days in the field with such encounters is a privilege that my role brings to me. Your life and work may or may not give you the same opportunity. If it doesn't, then go out in 2018 and meet some ordinary people like her. You may not have to go far, the country is full of ordinary people doing extraordinary work.

But go with empathy and compassion. And the fires of optimism will be stoked in plenty. Then we can ask ourselves the question: How can our own ordinary lives fuel optimism rather than pessimism?

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