

# Countering the false narrative

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Landing at the Jolly Grant airport, we drove through the mountains for 5 hours to Chinyalisaud. At 6pm, when we reached, a group of 50 teachers was discussing the challenges that children encounter when trying to understand place value in math. Teachers shared what had worked well in their classrooms. Each experience was critically appraised by the group, and a few fell apart in the examination. As the facilitator of the session was wrapping up the session to a close, the teachers turned to me and asked me to speak. We are familiar with each other, since I have been visiting them at least once a year for the past five years.

It was 7.30pm. We had to drive on to Uttarkashi and they had to go home. Some had come for this evening meeting of the Voluntary Forum of Teachers from as far as 20km, on their two-wheelers. That meant a 45-minute ride back in the dark in the mountains. I said it was too late, but they insisted. They wanted me to speak about the Teacher Absence Study that we had published in April 2017. I have written about the study in these columns.

The gist of the study is that the absenteeism numbers for teachers from schools is about 2.5%. This is sharply different from the popular imagination of absenteeism, with numbers between 25 and 50% routinely brandished, with no basis. The study also delves into other research reports, including from the World Bank titled “The Fiscal Cost of Weak Governance: Evidence from Teacher Absence in India”, which when studied carefully point to absenteeism numbers between 2.5 and 5%.

I described the study. They listened carefully and applauded at every key point. It’s unusual for a research study to receive applause anywhere, let alone in a small town in the mountains. But if you have talked to teachers this would be unsurprising, because the conclusions of the study demolishes the core myth behind the false vilification of teachers that is rife in our country. Rarely does any non-teacher attempt to understand their reality, and even rarer is any public counter to the false narrative.

One of them started narrating, as many joined in, an incident from the previous week. A local newspaper had a story with headline “Sub-divisional-magistrate Conducts Raids In Schools, Finds 54 Teachers Missing”. The sensationalist headline was supported by the misleading story, which made no attempt to explain that 53 of the 54 teachers were not in schools because they had been sent for training on government orders. They were not

missing. Over the next few days, the protestations of the teachers were ignored by the newspaper. After all, in today's media world, truth is not sufficient to stop catchy headlines and stories shaped by ideological commitments.

That newspaper in Garhwal is not very different in its quality on this matter from The Economist. The British weekly ran an editorial and an associated story last week on Indian schools. The two pieces are full of pedestrian analysis and sanctimonious prescriptions. It dishes out the weekly's all-purpose medicine for education, increased private schooling through vouchers. It has not even paused to consider that through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or right to education Act (RTE) norms, India already runs the world's largest virtual voucher programme. And that as private school enrolments have risen in the past 10 years, learning levels have declined. It's a cavalier vilification of teachers, exemplified by its blasé assertion that a quarter of teachers play truant. Of course, there is no basis to this. But who is going to listen to Indian government school- teachers in the face of an editorial from the venerable The Economist?

In that week, I must have met over 300 teachers in Uttarkashi, Maneri, Barkot, Naugaon and Purola. These meetings were of groups of teachers, who meet regularly to learn from each other, to improve as teachers. All the meetings were in the evening, the teachers investing their own time and money. In every meeting, we went through the same conversation as in Chinyalisaud. The conversations acted as balms, however temporary.

The next week, I was in central Rajasthan. I met 200 teachers in similar meetings in Newai, Tonk, Malpura and Aligarh. The conversations were similar. The refrain echoes across the country. Teachers live singed by the injustice of their vilification. Especially when in reality they give everything to perform a complex role, often in very trying circumstances. The weak are always the easiest to convert to folk devils and witches, and burnt at the stake. And that is what we are doing with our teachers.

That is not only unjust, but ineffective. Education can improve only as much as classroom pedagogic practice and school culture improves. This improvement is dependent entirely on teachers. And that cannot happen by shaming, fear and threats, especially because teaching is a complex and creative endeavour.

We need teachers to be enthusiastic leaders of change, on their own. We need to invest in teachers and support them. Most of the 8.8 million teachers across the country are at it already, and will respond even more if this is done. But too many of us have cobwebs in our minds, and treat the 97.5% teachers in the image like the truant 2.5%, egged on by the likes of The Economist, that have no stake in our future.

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