

An average week in a school

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The school was painted canary yellow. I haven't seen another school of that colour. It was perched at one end of the village far away from the houses, where the steep slope began. The village of 1,000 people was on a mountain top higher than most, with the endless Kumaon on all sides. Almora was visible about 30km away. The startling yellow, and its dramatic perch, probably makes the school visible from very long distances, like a lighthouse. The village is called Satyun.

The colour of that school was the only out-of-the-ordinary thing that I saw and heard last week in Kumaon in Uttarakhand. It was a normal week, spent in villages and small towns, meeting teachers and other government school functionaries. In three days, across five meetings, I would have heard 150 odd of them. All the people who attended the meetings were there on their own volition and everyone knew that the purpose of the gathering was discussing how to improve their schools. There aren't enough teachers in remote villages. Each teacher has to handle multiple grades, a very difficult task. The government must reallocate or recruit for those villages; it's clearly their most important responsibility once they have opened the schools. Many of the schools have very few children, scores of them with less than 10; they should be consolidated with nearby schools. However, shutting down any school is a big political issue. The government should not have gone about implementing the policy of "a school within a kilometre of each habitation" thoughtlessly, especially in the hills, where the terrain makes the notion of a kilometre an underappreciated problem.

The children in government schools are from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. These parents also don't have the time to provide any support, struggling with multiple marginal occupations to make a living. All this makes teaching at these schools far more difficult than at private schools. Aside from the promise of English, having teachers for every grade and good uniforms, private schools don't do more. In fact the quality of education in these schools is not as good as government schools; this is known first-hand because most government school teachers send their children to private schools.

There is an urgent need for good training and mentoring for the teachers. The new curricular approach is difficult to handle, they find themselves inadequate to deal with it. They cannot understand how the Right to Education mandated "continuous comprehensive evaluation" can work.

These are voices that echo everywhere in such a meeting across the country. All the points made are valid, and these are issues that cannot be resolved by the people present at such meetings, they need the "system" to address them. It must be remembered that these are people who want to improve things and are saying all this with that good intent.

There are other kinds of voices as well.

The yellow school's head-teacher is Neeta Pant, and its cluster resource person is Sanjay Joshi. As we chatted with them, we saw many students prancing into the school, touch Neeta's feet and rush out. They were older students, not of that school. We learnt that they were all ex-students of the yellow school, who had joined the nearby secondary school. Their love for the old school and the head-teacher is such that they meet her before going to their own school, almost every morning. The general air of cheerfulness in that school gives a hint of where this love originates.

The school has the usual two-classroom building, with a small room for the teachers, a verandah at the front, a kitchen on the side, and a largish ground in the front. It publishes its own eight-page newsletter with pieces by students and other persons related to the school. The children are intensely engaged, as are the teachers. Neeta and Sanjay are planning academic improvements for the next session; they are also planning to introduce English. I asked them about the startling colour of the school. They said, "Well, we just went ahead, did it, no one stopped us." That's their general attitude: Let's do what is required, what we think is good, no one stops us, and we certainly can't wait for the entire system to improve. This line was repeated by 15 other people in those five meetings. Often as a response to points made that the "system" needs to change.

The "system" needs to change: culturally, institutionally and in many more ways fundamentally. Efforts of individuals on the ground are not sufficient to change the system. But they are absolutely necessary: to move forward, to improve what we can and keep hope alive. There are enough such people in this country to keep the faith. Which is why last week was just an average week, meeting people who are not hanging around waiting for the system to change, but are trying to change it.

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