

Anurag Behar: A day on the road

 livemint.com/Opinion/hrSwq1xrmVrQY6Vyi1qZEO/Anurag-Behar-A-day-on-the-road.html

January 8, 2014



Till about four years ago, I lived with severe acrophobia. Garhwal cured me. I don't understand how, but driving for hours on narrow, crumbling roads, with 400-600m drops on one side, did this. The cure was tested to its limits two months ago by Jagmohan. He took Anant and me to villages in the mountains that had been completely cut-off by the deluge in June 2013. The roads to these villages were being repaired, but it was taking time. The purpose of the visit was to see how the schools in these villages had coped with months of tenuous connection to the rest of the Uttarkashi district.

We would drive for a few hundred metres and then there would be no road. And Jagmohan would say, "Ye thoda risky hai." He is an understated person; this phrase was in keeping with his character. Anant is a man of the mountains. Even he sat tense through each leg of the journey. It didn't affect me any more than him.

That night we met Col. Ajay Kothiyal, principal of the Nehru Mountaineering Institute, who has climbed Everest twice. He has played a key role in the relief and rehabilitation operations in that area since the deluge. He raised his eyebrows in surprise when he heard of our day's journey, "Well, that's something." That's the top medal for me.

The schools haven't got any medal. They opened up three-four weeks after the deluge. To operate, they have to manage a range of activities; in addition to teaching, for example, they have to get the salt and rice for the mid-day meal, have to report back on what's going on in the school, have to get paper and chalk. All of it is simple elsewhere, but not there, where every narrow mountain road fades into a narrower crumbling dirt track.

The teachers have to be there to run the schools. How do they get there? Usually, most teachers commute from wherever they live to the villages they are posted in. With the state of the roads, the daily commute has become much longer and riskier. They have figured out solutions; some have taken up rooms in the school. The district education administration has also got volunteers from each of these severely affected villages to help out at their local schools. So, somehow the schools go on.

Three of the schools that we went to brought to life an example of alternative roads in life.

The first one had two teachers and about 50 children. The head teacher had been transferred from some other schools a few months ago. He was not very happy. The children seemed disinterested. He seemed like a reasonable man, but couldn't get his

mind away from how unreasonable his transfer was. During the time that we were there, he had no interaction with any of the students. He has been a teacher for over 20 years.

The second school had one young teacher. She was living in that village, which was perched up somewhere high in the mountains. Her family lives 50km away; she visits them on the weekends. The children were playing enthusiastically in the sun. The teacher was energetic, and had incisive comments about her pre-service teacher education programme. The kids seemed to like her.

Even in the brief conversation, she seemed to flit between enthusiasm and uncertainty about her profession. She liked the teaching and the kids, but she felt alone in the school. The community was supportive, but living away from her family was not practical. Every sentiment had its opposite, in her.

We walked down a steep slope for 30 minutes to get to a third school. It was a two-room building with a verandah facing west. As we walked in, we saw two teachers sitting in the verandah surrounded by about 60 children, engaged in intense activity. They were completely engrossed and did not notice us. When one of the teachers saw us, she was embarrassed. They continued to sit there with the children, and work with them, while they talked with us. They had been teachers for over 20 years and loved their work. It felt like a good school, and Jagmohan said it was.

The young woman in the second school may end up like the teachers in the third school, or like the one in the first school. Which road she will take depends on many things, but certainly also on the kind of support the education system provides her. Our system design has the required support mechanisms in the form of cluster and block level resources, but we have to make them function.

My thoughts about the road ahead for the young teacher faded away as we took the non-existent roads back to Uttarkashi, leaving just the wonder of schools that work every day, where even a day is an adventure for most of us.

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation and also leads sustainability initiatives for Wipro Ltd. He writes every fortnight on issues of ecology and education. Comments are welcome at othersphere@livemint.com.

To read Anurag Behar's previous columns, go to www.livemint.com/othersphere-

Catch all the [Business News](#), [Market News](#), [Breaking News](#) Events and [Latest News](#) Updates on Live Mint. Download The [Mint News App](#) to get Daily Market Updates. [More](#)

Subscribe to **Mint Newsletters**

Topics



Let us bring the summary of the day's most important news directly to you with our newsletters!

[Subscribe for free](#)

[Post your comment](#)

There is more to the story

To continue reading, subscribe to Mint Premium at **25% discount**

[Claim offer now](#)