

Big small steps | Mint

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My childhood friend Kabir would have been thrilled to be there. The talk was about how to use the school building for pedagogical purposes, i.e., for teaching and learning. Kabir is an architect who specializes in developing and using the premises of a school as an integral part of education.

There was discussion about how doors can be used to explain angles and how the woodwork and tiles can be used for learning the concept of area. This discussion would be unusual in most schools. And this was the government school in Khamaria, in rural Chhattisgarh.

Khamaria is about 17km from Dhamtari, the district headquarters, which is 75km from Raipur. It's a small village, 12km off the main road, with about 975 inhabitants, mostly farming families with very small land holdings.

The plains of Chhattisgarh are never cold, the January afternoon was pleasant. We were sitting on the floor, but for the head-teacher and a village elder. I weighed whether it was because they wanted a befitting higher status or because of the difficulty of sitting on the floor, and realized that it was the latter.

The discussion was unusual in extreme, not only because of where it was happening, but also because of who was involved. It was with a few women from the village whose children were studying in the school. It was a meeting with the representatives of the village community. There were seven women and six men from the village. Along with the head-teacher, two of the teachers were there as well. There were four of us visitors.

We were told that a few months ago the villagers had rented a tractor-trolley. Some twenty of them head-climbed in it, along with the school teachers, and had gone to visit the government primary schools in Gahnasiar and Doongripara, about 75km away. They went because they had heard from one of the teachers, who had been there before, that these were excellent schools. They spent the entire day there, and learnt many practical things about good schools. Ever since then, they had been working together to implement the practices that they had seen. The ideas about using the building for teaching came from the visit.

This intensity of community engagement in a school is unusual. They described how it had developed. Clearly the head teacher had played a big role. In his assessment the turning point was when a few years ago, the community (cajoled by him) decided that

only women will be members of the school management committee (SMC). The transformation that decision brought about was captured symbolically in something quite simple. When the SMC had mostly men, a meeting scheduled at 3pm would start at 6pm, if at all. With the change in the gender mix, a meeting scheduled at 3pm has full quorum by 2.45pm.

While this story was being told, the men were smiling. At the end one of them added that it was natural that an SMC with women will work better, because the mothers were far more invested into their children and their well-being. By this time anecdotes about the school and its history were free-flowing. It was repeatedly pointed out that the elder sitting on the chair had himself done the woodwork of the school, some 25 years ago.

We heard of an intriguing practice at the school. Any child who is absent, even for a day, writes a nice letter. This is not a leave application. It describes in detail what she did while not in school and what she learnt from that. She then reads out the letter in the morning assembly. Later we read through some of these letters.

As the conversation unfolded, we learnt that the teacher in charge of the primary section had refused a promotion because he wanted to stay and help take things forward, and so had moved to the upper-primary section as a teacher. This quiet man sitting in the corner seemed to be the force behind many of these things. One day he had asked two of the women there to get into a class and talk about values. His reasoning was, who better than mothers to talk about values. The two women eventually used folk tales for the class.

As you walk around the school, you see many things that can improve. But they look trivial, dominated by the spirit of the school and the community, striving for improvement. How does this spirit get fostered? There is no mechanical formula or recipe.

We won't even search for one, once we accept education to be the complex social process it is. Some minimal conditions required we are aware of: a few motivated teachers, basic support from the system and a sense of public good; with that we have to have a go everywhere. And also recognize the big small steps in the Khamarias of this country rather than berating them in meeting rooms and newspaper columns.

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