

School in the desert

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He is an imposing presence, the kind that will immediately put the lid on anyone's road rage, even in Delhi. The white crown of hair on his head reinforces the intensity of his eyes. It's almost as though he is continually glaring. Our exchange of pleasantries in his office was much shorter than the usual. He wanted to move to the classes.

The March sun was also glaring on the sand dunes. Out of the sun, the shade was still pleasant. He took us to grade 2 which was sitting in the verandah on the floor. There were about 15 kids. There was no preamble, he stooped just a bit, and threw the words at the kids "ye Bangalore se aaye hain". His presence, his voice and his eyes, all told me that the kids will now wilt.

The smallest girl in the group pounced up, eyes dancing from him to me. She screamed, "He has come from Bangalore." He said, "wo aadmi sadak pe khadaa hai." A boy responded, "that man is standing on the road." He said, "wo ek gaay hai." Another kid, "that is a cow." This rapid fire continued between them. There was not the slightest change in his demeanour. The kids loved it; they were competing to respond. After witnessing this for 10 minutes, it was quite clear that the kids understood English, it was not some parrot-speak of rote memorized phrases.

This was the government Upper Primary School in Hardoni-Meghwalon-Ki-Dhani; on thorny sand dunes, 50 km from Barmer in Rajasthan. Shyam Lal Sharma is his name. He is the head teacher of the school. There are 139 children in the school, which has five teachers. It's a nice, neat building, with a walled, naturally sand filled, one acre playground. This seems to be quite the norm for government schools in Rajasthan, pleasant and spacious, especially in western Rajasthan.

The location of the school is such that over 80% children are from the most disadvantaged communities, the other 20% only relatively less so. Outside the tourist settings of the desert, if you venture out it's hard to figure out how (and why) people live in those conditions. But they do, with an equanimity which perhaps only living with an eternal natural foe can bring, and whom you befriend.

A math class for grade 4 was in progress. Chotu Lal Meghwal was the teacher, he is very young. They were working on fractions. Sharma observed silently for a minute, and then he wrote on the black board: $23 \frac{23}{27} + 63 \frac{17}{8} + 97 \frac{15}{33}$.

Even before he had finished writing, a boy had volunteered to go to the board and simplify the number. I sat with the kids on the floor. The boy went about it slowly and methodically, writing every step on the black board. There were three girls around me; two of them were engrossed in the problem. The third kept looking up at the pace of the boy, trying to beat him. All of them were clear about the steps, and reached the solution. The girl, who was competing, made an error in one addition in the end. I pointed that to her, she instantly realized her error and corrected it. They continued with other fractions as we walked out.

The next room had grade 1. Even before Sharma said anything, the kids started making a racket. It was obvious that they liked him. He asked whether anyone wanted to say the pahadaa i.e. multiplication tables. The din only increased. Finally he had to point at a kid to start; he said he will do 23. I thought I had misheard him. But he started and finished the table of 23 up to 10, in one breath. The class was uncontrollable after that; they were all reciting tables, and each of their own choice. It ranged from 2 to 30, and it seemed like they were playing a super exciting game.

The level of learning in the school (with genuine comprehension and understanding) in math and in English, which is a third language for the students, is quite something. The easy confidence, engagement and energy of the kids, makes it a fun and exciting place. It deals with every conceivable disadvantage that the children have, and overcomes them. It's a good school.

The key is of course Sharma. We chatted as we were leaving. He said he doesn't want to take any promotion. That's because as you grow in the system, you become distanced from children.

That was the third good government school I visited in the dunes that day. I am sure there are some in your vicinity. Go and visit them, and you will realize how false the popular narrative of most government schools being shoddy and teachers being absent is. India's school education is not in good shape, but if we continue to hold on to superficial narratives, we will not be able to find real solutions.

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