

The school on the river Tons

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If I could do it, the only temple I'll build will be for Karna (one of the central characters in the epic Mahabharata). I think there is no one more worthy than him for a country that is in short supply of heroes. When my friend Jagmohan heard this from me, he was convinced that it was Karna who pulled us to Mori.

We drove to Mori from Purola in Uttarakhand in an hour, through a pine forest which had no break. We had decided to make this trip the previous day on a whim, to meet Prem Singh Rawat. I had heard about his transformation from a disinterested block resource officer in the education department, thinking of Mori as a "punishment posting", to a man driven, almost possessed to improve education in the block.

Mori is just about as far as you can go on a road in this country. It is a very small town in the Uttarkashi district, on the river Tons. Even in this mountain land of divine rivers, Tons is a category of its own. Its furious flow and blue water dominate even the majestic mountains. No one drinks its water.

That is because the origins of Tons define a tragedy: the loss of the righteous Kauravas to the Pandavas. The people of the valley, all followers of the Kauravas, cried and cried on a cosmic injustice and thus from their unstoppable tears the river Tons was born.

When I saw Tons, the myth sounded almost believable. Jagmohan then told me about the wooden temple of Karna, 7km further from Mori, which is when he suggested that it was my hero who pulled me there.

Rawat was in a training session, so we had some time. We decided to visit the government primary school in Dei, a village on the other bank of Tons. It has 46 students in grade I-V; a neat building with two rooms and a verandah, which is used more than the rooms. With the blue Tons flowing below and steep wooded mountains all around, few places can be more beautiful, and fewer places more distant. In this last mile of India, it is a wonder that there is a functioning government school, a wonder that we take for granted.

It is functioning because of Aruna and Mirchu Lal. Aruna commutes two hours one way from Purola to reach Dei, Lal treks three hours a day to and from his village. Aruna lives in Purola because her husband runs his own (private) school there. She has been at the school in Dei for nine years.

She told me the tale of Dei. It was originally located about three hours climb from where it is today. The people of Dei saw patches of cultivable land on the banks of Tons, so they set up a few huts there. Over time there were two Deis, one on the Tons and one up in the mountains. Over time all families shifted to the village on the river. They would go up to the original village only for some rituals; one such was a festival for which they would go up for a month.

So nine years ago, Aruna encountered this puzzling problem: all the children would disappear, mid-session, for more than a month. She climbed up three hours to see first hand the cause of this puzzle. She then started a dialogue with the village community, trying to convince them that Dei-on-Tons was as much their home as the Dei-on-the-mountain and so they could as well celebrate the month-long festival on the Tons. In time, she succeeded. Now the village doesn't migrate for a month, and so her students don't miss a month of classes, which is what she wanted.

I asked her why she took the trouble of trying to change the village. If I was looking for any grand answers or deep motivation, there were none. She was very matter-of-fact. "If as a teacher, you have no students in your school for a month, what do you do?" You try to bring them back, that's all.

Every child in that school can read and write, with good comprehension; we tested it. They talked with us confidently and thoughtfully. We saw a remarkable project that they had done together as a school, an insightful analysis of the problems development had solved and created in Dei.

Aruna chatted with me in the same matter-of-fact tone. She saw nothing out of the ordinary in her school. She said she was not doing anything special. She was just the ordinary teacher, merely doing her job.

This ordinary teacher is one of thousands. As we fulminate over policy, crib about financing and don't really do anything to support them, these thousands go on doing their jobs. That's a reason for hope.

I will be back in Mori. I missed meeting Rawat (his session had not finished by the time I left) and I couldn't go to the Karna temple; so two heroes beckon me. Although I did get to meet another one—the one who just does her job diligently.

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