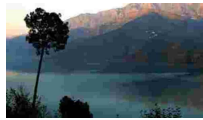


Redemption of faith

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Sardar Pinder Singh Bhangra was an adventurer. Even he had a tingling sensation when he saw the spectacular sight of the 6,316mt high Bandarpunch Peak. This was somewhere on the long, winding and climbing road to Uttarkashi. In an exercise of local myth-making, that spot is now called Tingling Point.

I also felt the tingling, but not because of the view of the peak, which I couldn't see at all as it was covered by clouds right from the bottom of the Assi Ganga valley, but because of my chat with Dhiraj. He was selling vegetables at Tingling Point. It was cold, but the 12-year-old didn't seem to feel it at all.

We negotiated with him the price of thorny bitter gourd, and admired his strength that carries 20-30kg of vegetables up that steep and deep distance of the valley. He takes two days off every week from school to sell the vegetables. The days are set—Monday and Wednesday. From the way he spoke he seems to be taking school seriously. He said: aaj ke liye sabji, aage ke liye school vegetables for today and education for the future wisdom indeed for a 12-year-old, enough to leave me tingling.

It was another day, another stop, on another winding road in the Garhwal; this time for lunch, at Lakshmi's hut. I hesitate to call it a dhaba, because the word has acquired pop grandeur, and this really was a hut. My shepherd and friends, Anant, Jagmohan and Prakash, know Lakshmi well because of the countless trips on those treacherous roads. We had carried spinach, potato and tomato, knowing that at the precarious height of Lakshmi's hut, vegetable supply is unreliable.

She was quite upset with that. She said: Don't you know in this season, our patch gives enough vegetables? Anant, Prakash and Lakshmi then cooked the best meal I have had outside a home in a long time. She kept chatting with us, like an old friend.

I learnt that her husband is a daily wage earner. He is skilled as a mason, but he does the work he gets. He leaves early, and is back after nightfall. Her old father-in-law helps her in running the kitchen, and growing vegetables in season (which they also sell). On a good day she may feed 20 travellers like us; on a bad day she has to be happy with none. I asked her how much money they made. Enough to survive and to send her two children to school and her brother to college, she said. That, according to her, was the central, long-term issue: education. She kept the vegetables which we had brought only after much cajoling, and we left on the winding road.

The plains of Raichur in north-east Karnataka do not have the aesthetic or spiritual succour of the Himalayas. They can grind a visitor down, especially in the summers. On such a hot summer afternoon, Raghavendra showed me videos which he had made on an inexpensive camera.

It was a patient investigation of why schools have low attendance during the cotton-picking season. Children don't show up at school because they are especially "capable" of cotton picking. They don't have to bend to pick the low-growing cotton balls, since they are short, and their hands are gentler than that of an adult. This is in addition to the simpler fact that when cotton has to be picked, it has to be picked, so it's sort of all-hands-to-the-deck.

Anyone familiar with those areas won't find this surprising. What is actually (pleasantly) surprising is that these children are enrolled in schools, and at most other times they do go to school. This is the first generation in these communities going to school. They do it because they have started believing that school education is important.

The massive increase in enrolment numbers in schools over the past two decades or so, across India, isn't an adequate picture. It hides actual attendance numbers of children and there is also a bit of fudging of data on the ground. But the massive increase is real, and does accurately reflect a very critical change across our country: across class, caste and creed, there is a dramatic increase in the importance of school education. Battling every conceivable physical, economic and social shackle, 200 million children are showing up in Indian schools. They show up with the faith that education is their future.

Lakshmi works for that, Dhiraj pauses work for that. They put their faith in the education system and entrust it with their future.

We know the state of our school education. The schools do not deserve this faith of millions yet. The only redemption is in giving it our best shot; we have generated the faith, now we have to at least try our hardest to fulfil it. That, as I have argued in these columns, needs fundamental change at all levels: teaching, curriculum, assessment and school administration.

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