

# TOWARDS FREEDOM

A Short Journey





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# TOWARDS FREEDOM: A SHORT JOURNEY

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## आज़ादी की ओर एक छोटा सा सफ़र

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Azim Premji Foundation Associate Programme-2021





# Acknowledgements

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*A pre-reading activity for '1,2, buckle my shoe'*





# आज़ादी की ओर

## एक छोटा सा सफ़र

Writing works in two ways; either you write what you feel or you start feeling what you write. I experienced both these dynamics when I penned my journey of being an Associate with the Azim Premji Foundation.



I am a product of convent schooling, a problematic educational mechanism of high cut-offs which gave me an entry to Miranda House, New Delhi, and then to the Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. I always knew that I would become a social worker, having grown up watching my parents tutor the children of domestic workers. I, too, taught a few children during my years as an undergraduate student. But the experience was not deep enough to help me crack the philosophy of educating them in a holistic or effective manner.

While social work remained my target and destination, I looked around for ways of making my journey towards it rich and more meaningful. My restlessness found an antidote in my learnings from the MA Development course at the University. The journey for knowledge and perspective led me towards another target for myself: To reach a point where I would respect every human being and treat their life experiences and learnings on a par with mine.

With my classroom learning on track, it was time to seek life outside the protection of four walls. I knew what life in rural India is; I just needed to embrace the change. My interviewer asked me thrice if I had it in me. The real answer was in the offer letter in my hand. Before I knew it, my city-girl heart had embarked on a journey towards Barmer, my posting.



## Check-in @Barmer

The physical journey to Barmer came after several months of delay caused by the pandemic. Instead of 1 July 2020, my orientation into the Associate programme took place through the online mode in October that year. I finally reached Barmer on 1 November 2020.

At the time, I was still very much the girl who had lived in a hostel for seven years, in the company of 100-plus girls. In Barmer, I lived in a rented house, with a colleague I barely knew and an unknown family. I had to wash, cook and clean for myself. It was a definitive step towards acknowledging the comforts and privileges I had always taken for granted.

*Barmer  
started to  
grow on me*

Without much ado, Barmer started to grow on me. It was a far cry from Delhi and Bengaluru, but there was something endearing about the Rajasthani town. In Barmer, I didn't need to take out time for myself. Just the sight of the hills from my terrace, with a star-spangled sky above, filled my nights with thoughts and reflections on life.

The first month went by in a flash in getting to know my team, settling into a new house and setting, and picking up small but significant details about the life of an Associate. I was impressed with the role the library plays in the Associate journey. The emphasis on regular reading and writing down our reflections was of great interest to me.

Our engagement with the Azim Premji School began towards the end of November. The school, at the time, was conducting classes in pockets, and I got a chance to be a part of Std I and II. The flow of the class included rhymes, reading, togetherness and a lot of positive chaos. Working with the team gave me a preliminary idea about an ideal classroom space. I also got a chance to make lesson plans and execute them with the support of the teachers. Their guidance and reviews helped me in improvising the content and execution of the plan(s). In mid-January 2021, when government schools started calling their students back to class, it was time for me to move on to the next step of the journey.



# Classroom learnings

The following leg of the Associate programme took me to a government school where I was to learn all aspects of teaching a class.

The Lani Kantha primary school in Barmer's Magne ki Dhani panchayat has around 60 students and two teachers. When I started going there, classes were still not fully on due to the pandemic. Teachers were in fact calling students to school in small groups. I spent three months in the school, working with students of Std I, II, IV and V in a classroom environment. In these months, I got a firsthand experience of what teaching is all about.

*A lesson on 'A Tree'*



To begin with, managing a multi-grade classroom – with students of different age and learning levels – was a challenge. While we managed to keep the older students under some kind of discipline, the younger ones – often siblings of the older pupils – proved to be quite a handful. Activities related to colouring and verbal communication helped us bring the situation under control. The older children responded well to gentle heartfelt conversations.

With English as my primary subject, I set out to make language learning a fun experience for my students. I split up my lesson plans over a week, giving children enough time to learn, absorb and retain the lesson. The classes came to a halt when the second wave of the pandemic swept across India.

*I got a firsthand experience of what teaching is all about*

The work in this school made me find my comfort and my equation with children. It also opened my eyes to several stark realities of life. I saw how ingrained the concepts of caste and religion are in the minds of children. I also saw some teachers' casual approach towards corporal punishment. These were disturbing facts, but it didn't make me lose hope or turn away from the school.



With enthusiasm and a desire to learn, I started interacting with the teachers of various schools. The interaction began with language workshops, which gave me a chance to take a proactive role in teacher training. Other than this, I took one Voluntary Teacher Forum (VTF) on the theme 'Print Rich Environment in Classroom'. I was also an active member of the 'Sunday Reader's Club'.

*In class with 1st and 11nd graders*



Just like children, teachers can also be a challenging cohort to deal with. While some are open to ideas and extra activities, some are just too busy to even consider learning anything new. Then there are the ones who are completely silent during workshops and sessions and also those who are always complaining about almost anything. My experience of dealing with teachers made me more patient while also teaching me how to reply with respect and conveying a message with clarity.







# The COVID-19 campaign

The outbreak of the pandemic compelled us to focus on health more than education. Before I knew it, I was a part of a project on universal vaccination. I joined the efforts soon after recovering from the infection myself. During the lockdown, I kept hearing about the number of people who succumbed to the disease. The emotional toll pressed me into action and I was determined to give the project my best.

*On a community  
visit to understand  
vaccination  
behaviour*



I worked on data mapping for universal vaccination. This was a new project for the Foundation. I started off with a degree of uneasiness because the objectives and goals were unclear. Eventually, however, things fell in place and the rigorous fieldwork for the same ended up being great teaching experiences. I was responsible for weekly documentation of this project, which taught me the importance of coordination between stakeholders.

*The  
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Whilst trying to fathom the reasons behind vaccine hesitancy, I witnessed an opinionated social response to the issue. For example, there were areas where we were told that a particular caste or religion was refusing the shots. I still remember the day when I kept hearing “Muslims” are hesitant. This was the first time I saw myself as a Muslim in the city. Probably that is how the nicotine of identity politics work. My conversations with Ravi helped me come out of this state of mind. He encouraged me to have a broader perspective on identities and popular opinion. He made me understand why less heed should be paid to statements such as “Muslims lack education” or “Muslims are backward”. I learnt to keep a balanced outlook on-field thereon.

The work on universal vaccination was challenging, but the exposure of the local geography made up for it. Driving through these desert routes gave me greater confidence and a better sense of the map. The strongest revelation for me on the project was the

network of female workers who are the last rung of the rural health structure hierarchy. The exemplary work by these women is underrated, underpaid and thankless.

It also occurred to me that these very active and confident women were mostly reluctant to interact with men. I wondered why. It made me think about my own journey towards being an “independent woman”. These women and I seemed to be the two sides of a coin. Were we really independent? Did independence mean different things to us?

*Children with characters from a story*





# Independence, through a lens

आज़ादी मेरे लिए वो है, जहाँ मैं खुलकर सोच पाऊँ, और अपनी सोच को सही- ग़लत में तोलने की हिम्मत रख पाऊँ। आज़ादी वो है जब मेरी आवाज़ मेरी ही हो, बिना डरे, बिना सहमें।

(Translation: To me, freedom is where I can think independently and have the courage to weigh my thoughts in terms of right or wrong. Freedom is where my voice remains my own, without fear or hesitation.)

आज़ादी मेरे लिए वो है, जहाँ मैं खुलकर सोच पाऊँ, और अपनी सोच को सही- ग़लत में तोलने की हिम्मत रख पाऊँ

I always aspired to this for myself and when I started work with the children, I bore this context in mind. My convent education had exposed me to schools in a very structured manner, where classrooms are like compartments and discipline means cleanliness, uniformity, silence and obedience. A lot of these things are inspired from the colonial model which I saw breaking down slowly in the Azim Premji School.

My limited work with the team gave me some strong insights on how to view 'inclusivity' tangibly. To me, the strongest point of the Azim Premji School was the team's ability to make each child enjoy the same classroom experiences, minus the barriers of caste, religion, ethnicity or social status. This frees the country's future citizens of the shackles of class differences.

Also, what drives me to coin the term 'tangibility of inclusivity' is the way schoolchildren are taught to learn and help others learn by being around for one another. This is something that can rid the learning environment of superiority and inferiority complexes.

*Developing gross motor skills while learning alphabets*





# Conclusion

While the Associate journey is technically over, in my mind it is still ongoing.

इस पूरे सफ़र ने मुझे ना सिर्फ़ शहरी आँखों से गाँव की जिंदगी को समझना सिखाया, बल्कि मुझे हर दिन यह भी समझाया है कि क्या होता है एक ऐसा इंसान होना ? जिसका मक़सद होना चाहिए कि वो अपनी आज़ादी के जरिये किसी और को भी आज़ाद करा पाए। और वह यह तब तक नहीं कर सकता जब तक ये ना समझ ले की सबकी आज़ादी एक सी नहीं होती | आज़ादी वही है जब सब अपनी- अपनी आज़ादी का रास्ता खुद समझ कर तय कर पाएँ ।

*(Translation: This journey didn't just make me view rural life through the lens of a city dweller. It has taught me that a truly independent person is someone who can make others independent too. And no one can achieve this till they realise that freedom is not the same for everyone. Independence is that goal that each one should be able to find for oneself.)*

Barmer made me more independent than bigger cities. Minus the rage and frenzy of the metros, it also gave me a sense of safety and security. It also made me appreciate the different degrees and types of independence. Whenever I met a woman teacher or a welfare worker, I would ask myself if they, too, are independent in their own way. Earlier, I thought financial independence is the line to reach. After seeing the women of Barmer, I reoriented my goals. I realised that the size of the wallet alone doesn't decide personal liberties and freedom.

It took me a lot of time, people's support and regular counselling to be able to write up my very special journey. There were times when I didn't feel connected to the present. But revisiting the days has helped me find myself in the words that I have put together.

Thank you!







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