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When teachers come together, there's no stopping them

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Situated in the Pant Nagar university campus is an otherwise non-descript building which could easily be mistaken for some private school campus. This building incidentally is a Government school. A school where you will find teachers long after the school is over discussing or planning the next day's activities. A school where the teachers ensure that government duties don't come in the way of teaching even if it means doing the work in the evening. A school where the head teacher learns to dance so that she can train her students for cultural programmes. A school where teachers are not just confined to teaching but one can find their footprints in almost every part of the school activity. A school where the teachers treat the school as their own and can be found discussing issues based on topics as varied as the construction work to talking about their discoveries on the internet related to some topics done in the class. Welcome to an amazing school - the Government Madhyamik School, Nagla.



"What you see is an initiative taken by our team which has played an important role in not just supervising the construction work but also ensuring that all aspects of the school function properly," said Ravi Mohan, a teacher who greeted me on my visit to the school. He goes on to tell me about the school... "Earlier there was no boundary wall and all types of people who had nothing to

do with school would loiter here. The land around the school required major land fill and los of brickwork. During the initial period we would sit for hours and sometimes even days, on issues that I am sure you or for that matter even the officials would not have noticed. For instance, the designing of the motif on the main entrance - a tightly held fist - which symbolised five stake holders i.e. the administration, the teacher, the child, community and the school, was the result of a many discussions," reiterated Ravi.

“We don’t adhere to any timing when we are in school," he later told me while walking towards the office. "We take a short break after school and are usually back by about 5'o clock and then we normally stay on till 6 or 7 in the evening. Surfing the internet or discussing the next day’s agenda or the problems that have cropped up in school are all thrashed out threadbare”. I could only watch him with bewilderment. Is this really a government school? If so, then why is it that everything I am seeing and listening to conflicts with the image that I have in my mind of a government school? Pradeep Pandey, a teacher, and a part of the team adds, " In the initial days we were seriously contemplating naming the school GPS Nagla, like a private school, but later better sense prevailed and we settled with the present name."

In all the hours that I spent in school, not for a second did our discussion deviate from the focus. It was the school all the way. It was as if the discussion would lead to a solution to all the problems. “We have a strength of 270 at present which goes up to about 300, as time progresses. With a staff of three and one head teacher and two voluntary teachers, trainings and workshops interspersed with government duties really make our task herculean. Finishing the curriculum and finishing it well becomes almost impossible." I had to ask, “Then how do you manage to maintain that most important part of the academic process - *Quality*?" Here is the answer I received... "Ours must be the only school that does not believe in completing the curriculum for the sake of completing it. If we are not able to finish our curriculum then the numbers of chapters completed becomes our syllabus for the year. For us it is really important that the child should not be burdened. The understanding and application of what is taught is given utmost importance.”

With constant shuffling of teachers, in and out of the classes the next question that came to mind was, “How do you manage to teach such a large number of students effectively?" “We have a lot of problems and staff is one of them. The content and methodology is another. At times we are in a fix when a particular way of teaching is just not delivering the desired results. That is the time we use the internet," he says, pointing to a computer in the corner of the room, courtesy donors from far flung areas who have nothing to do with the school.

“Can the foundation provide us some inputs on teaching certain topics that students find difficult to comprehend, in say Mathematics or Hindi?” he asks, looking at me with so much hope that catches me off-guard. My instant response was visibly evasive, and I fumbled with words saying that I would get back to him after consulting with my colleagues.

With the electricity playing hide and seek, we decided to go outside, to sit on the cemented platforms under the trees that had been made especially for the children. Sitting in the shade, he tells me, "You know it’s my long cherished dream to have a laboratory where I can keep all the broken radios, watches, televisions, and cycles, which the children can just open-up, explore and learn from. I want the children to enjoy their childhood and not get too bogged down with bookish knowledge. We have children who come from places like Jharkhand and Eastern UP, and trying to make them understand the matter in hindi itself is an arduous task but I am sure an activity centre like this will surely be asset in making them understand through simple

experiments." I could only nod in agreement for the simple reason that people with such a passion do become infectious after a point. What is it that motivates him to work even after school hours and think about the children all the time? What drove him to work on ways to teach the children that went further than the usual duties of a teacher was beyond my comprehension.

"The land that you see on your right has been purposely left untouched and unfilled. During the monsoon the place gets filled up with almost 2 to 3 feet of water which helps in raising the water table. We have never had water problems and our boring pump works well round the year. By the way do you know that the boring pump was also a very personal initiative taken by the team members when we got to know that someone had rejected the offer, under the government sponsored scheme?"

"When the government decides to appoint a teacher exclusively for Urdu, then why not for Mathematics, English or Hindi? And why do we need to introduce Sanskrit from class three onwards when we are already burdened with the load of the existing subjects. Along with all the other subjects I also teach Sanskrit, which is not really my subject. I am very lucky that my children don't ask questions but God forbid, if someday they do then it will indeed be very embarrassing for me", says Ravi, explaining his predicament.

Back to the issue of staff, I ask, "How do you think that the good work done by you can be sustained if one of the members is transferred?" Ravi replies, "We have no answer and by the way, Pandeyji has already got his transfer orders. With no replacement in sight only God has an answer to your question. We can only pray that the person joining us is equally motivated. Who knows?"

A student came running to inform us that electricity was back and we could get back to the office. Back inside, Ravi continues, "The government wastes so much time with these workshops and training sessions. Tell me honestly.. does anything really come out of all this? Who is training us? Is that person really trained? I personally feel that the selection of these Master Trainers is very faulty. Wouldn't it be better to join informal teachers sessions where a group of teachers sit down voluntarily to discuss their problems or just share the *gyan* that they have acquired while teaching? Firstly, it is the distance. And then, then tell me honestly, if I want to discuss something in-depth on say some topic in science or Mathematics, will I get a set of people who are equally motivated? If no, then what's the point? And honestly speaking, where is the time? We have our own informal sessions in the school every evening, anyway!"

Though I have an idea about this, I go ahead and ask..."What is it that distinguishes your school from the other government schools?" Vinay Prabha Pathak, a Hindi teacher for class 5, responds, "It's the space that we give our children, which you must have noticed in the class activities, where they are not just asked to write questions and answers on their own but also do some activities related to the chapter done in class. The box files that the children maintain is a testimony to all this." This was indeed unique. The students were asked to write poetry, stories or just draw, based on the topic done in class. Coming from a similar background, I could understand the time and the patience required for all this. There is a tendency to curb childrens' creativity and we often want our children to be clones. But not here...Here the children had their box files and were very excited to read out their poems and stories which were original and very soulfully connected with their day-to-day activities. The children posed questions which were based on grammar and language and wanted me to share with them my thoughts on their work. I willingly agreed.





"After the regular school hours, we sometimes stay back to teach our children because they come from very poor and illiterate backgrounds. So to ensure that they at least open their books, some revision work takes place. We call our children to school with a promise that when they go back home they will help their brother or sister or even a neighbour , if possible. We want our children to have a bigger goal in life. Earlier a child was more than happy if he passed class 5 but now he wants to know what else he can do after that. So we guide him and coach him for the Navodaya and Sainik Schools." says Ravi. "We also buy reference books for them to help them take the entrance examination", adds Pradeep.

There is no doubt that the children are well looked after in this school and can concentrate on the learning and understanding without any distractions.

We could keep talking about the school, but the buzzing of the phone and the clock pointing to 4, reminds me that it is indeed time to call it a day. "If I can't learn the way you teach me, can you not teach me the way I can learn", is exactly what is being followed in this school. The irony with our education system is that the most important person in the education chain i.e. the child has

no say in the planning and implementation of the teaching process. To be unfair to the child is indeed a crime. Our main focus should be the children, and all the activities ought to revolve around them. At least thats what the constitution says. Even in the present system if you really want to children to learn, there are ways and means of doing it. The process is challenging but it is surely possible.

On my way back, the question that came to my mind was, "What is it that motivates a teacher? What is it that makes a teacher get up and go to school against all odds?" If we can really find an answer to this question then, maybe, who knows?...

This spotlight was sent to us by Yogesh Durgapal, from Azim Premji Foundation.

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