The Teacher as a change agent

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The Village and the school

The Government Higher Primary School (GHPS) in Jumalapur Dodda Thanda is 120 kilometres from the district centre of Yadgir. It is about two and a half hours’ journey from Yadgir. The school is one of the three in and around Jumalapur Dodda Thanda. The villages around the school comprise nearly 400 households. About 80% of the households have either small land holding or are involved in agricultural labour. A small percentage of the population, around 40 families, belong to the Lambani community, a backward community identified as Scheduled Castes (SCs). Members of the Lambani community are agricultural labourers, especially in the sugarcane fields.

The primary school has been serving the community since 1965. It has 500 students, 90% of who belong to the SC/ST (Scheduled Tribe) community. There are approximately 400 children enrolled in grades I to V and the rest are in grades VI and VII. The regular attendance is upward of 430 students. The school has an active School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) and a large board on the premises displays the details of the SDMC.

The school has four teachers appointed by the Department of Education including the in-charge Head Teacher (HT), Achchappa Gouda. Another five posts are lying vacant. Three guest teachers have been appointed as an ad-hoc arrangement. The school has five functional classrooms and one makeshift classroom has been added. The school has drinking water, playground, toilets, garden, electricity connection, and, radio and television facilities for the students.

Achchappa Gouda's story

Achchappa Gouda has been in the teaching profession for 19 years now. He was an assistant teacher and became the HT in-charge of GHPS Jumalapur in 2015. He lives in the vicinity of the school and knows every member of the community, as well as all the children. The relationship between the school and the community was inimical when he took charge and he was aware of the reasons for the community's displeasure. The community was unhappy with the school's failure in acquiring and utilizing resources for its development and it also suspected financial irregularities.

Achchappa Gouda’s understanding of the community and the school helped him in identifying a few deep-seated problems that seemed to come in the way of the school’s smooth functioning. Topmost on the list was the problem of irregular attendance. In a school with 500 enrolments, only 50% attended the school from June to October. This attendance would drop further after the month of October. Achchappa Gouda was familiar with this situation for years as an assistant teacher, but could not do much in that capacity. He saw an opportunity to change this situation when he took charge as HT.

Students enrolling but not attending school regularly is a common problem in most rural schools in India. School authorities are of the view that parents are not serious about the education of their children and have no interest in sending their children to school. Achchappa Gouda realized that to address this issue, he would have to engage with the community. He started talking to parents and other community members to understand their problems and reasons for their apathy regarding the education of their wards.

Problems of children from Lambani community

The Lambani community is one of the poorest communities in the region and is engaged in agricultural labour. Since agriculture work is seasonal, they have to migrate to find work. Most of them migrate to work in the sugarcane fields in the neighbouring district where harvesting usually starts in October and continues for about five months. Families take children along due to which children are out of school for almost half the year and face difficult challenges in learning.

Another challenge that the children from the Lambani community face is regarding the medium of instruction in schools. These children speak the Lambani language, while the medium of instruction in schools is Kannada. So, while in the early grades, they have problems in understanding lessons in Kannada, by the time they begin to do so, they have already completed, at least, a couple of years in school. This adds to their woes in learning.

At the time Achchappa Gouda took charge as HT, the school also had many other issues to grapple with. Children had to walk for a kilometre to fetch drinking water. A portion of the building had become dysfunctional. The number of classrooms was insufficient, and the school premises were not big enough for the activities of 500 children. There were no toilets and the midday meal scheme was functioning erratically in the absence of a full-time cook. Financial resources to meet the demands were also limited. Overall, the school was running against multiple odds.
The old building that was demolished

Efforts to retain children in school

Achchappa Gouda took all his teachers into confidence and under his leadership, the teachers put their heads together to start thinking imaginatively to help the children from the Lambani community, who were vulnerable to dropping out. What prompted them to come together was the fact that the community had started ignoring the teachers believing that they were not taking their jobs seriously. The teachers wanted to win the love and respect of the community for the work they did in school. They wanted to change the perception of the community.

Achchappa Gouda says that it would have been impossible to overcome the challenges without the team of talented and dedicated teachers he had with him. The teachers discussed many plans. Many of the initial discussions were on how to match the attendance with the enrolment. The teachers realized that engaging with the community was necessary. The SDMC was consulted. Achchappa Gouda had been thinking of starting a hostel for a long time, but the plan could not be materialized. Now there was an opportunity.

A Hostel for five months

When the idea of starting a ‘hostel kind of arrangement’ was proposed, there was a mixed reaction. Many were of the opinion that it would be risky to run a hostel. Moreover, the department would not give the necessary permission, as there are no provisions for a hostel for children studying in grade I to V. Safety of girls and mobilization of resources were the other challenges. But the HT, along with the other teachers, took on these challenges, one by one.

The Block Education Office (BEO) was consulted; Achchappa Gouda conveyed to it the severity of the problems and need for an intervention. All he asked of the BEO was that they would create no obstacles in his ambitious plan. The officials agreed. Next, the SDMC was taken into confidence and community members were involved in the plan. It was decided that after school hours, the classrooms would be used for lodging. The breakfast and supper would be cooked in the school using the arrangements already available for the midday meal program. The cost involved in running the hostel within the school facilities was calculated and parents agreed to pay Rs 700/- (per child) for the five-month period from October 2016 to February 2017.

Forty students enrolled for the hostel service in 2016. The teachers worked on rotation to supervise and care for the children. The hostel ran for the first five months with some challenges, but the experience gave the teachers, the confidence to continue.

Classrooms being used as a hostel after school.

The next year (2017-18), the school was better prepared for the hostel arrangement. Achchappa Gouda persuaded local politicians and got a borewell dug in the school premises and the problem of water supply was solved. The school appointed a dedicated cook from the local community, who could take care of the cooking requirements of the hostel students along with the regular midday meals, which too came to be better organized. The school managed to pool resources from the community for the expenses towards running the hostel. The families sending their wards to the hostel were requested to contribute jawar rotis and the school managed to gather a large number of rotis contributed by the parents. The school also hired a guest teacher from the local Lambani community, to work as the caretaker of the hostel. As a result of these actions, the number of students in the hostel rose to 80, that year.

Pooled jawar rotis.

Thopanna, a resident of the village, sends two of his children to the school. He feels that the situation in the school is improving. He had never bothered to visit the school earlier. Now, he fondly remembers his role in constructing the makeshift classroom. He narrates how they managed to get bamboo from the neighbouring village to erect it.

Community contribution – a plate stand.

Significant transformation

The plan for the hostel for children from migrant families was not a standalone development that was taking place; many positive changes were coming about simultaneously. The old building of the school was demolished, and a makeshift classroom was constructed with the help of the community. With the money sanctioned for the building, an adjacent piece of land was bought from a community member on a concessional rate. Three guest teachers were hired to fill the vacant teachers’ posts. Relations between the school staff and the SDMC were strengthened. The teachers started staying back after school. Attendance of students started improving. The enrolment number and the number of students attending school almost matched. Gradually, not just the number of children from the village joining schools in the neighbouring villages reduced, but children from the neighbouring villages also started joining GHPS Jumalapur. The number of students getting admission to the Morarji school has gone up from a few to 15 every year, which is an indicator that children’s learning has also improved. The hard work of the HT and his team drew the attention not only of the wider community but that of the media, as well. The success story of the school was covered by the local newspapers.

Minakshi is among the youngest girls who are staying in the school when their parents are away at the sugar fields in Kolar.
in the neighbouring Bagalkote district. She says she likes being in the school now. She likes studying mathematics. Her teachers think her fluency in Kannada has improved after she started staying in the school. The HT remembers that Minakshi’s mother was in tears when she had to leave her little girl behind in the school.

Teamwork

All this has been possible due to teamwork, says Achchappa Gouda. For him, the team is like a family and his role is that of an elder brother. The teachers say that they believe in working together and distributing their responsibilities. They take the initiative to visit the community and talk to parents whenever students are absent for a long period of time. They coerce parents to send their children to school regularly.

Unfinished work

Achchappa Gouda and his teachers believe that their work is far from over. Mallikarjun, who teaches children through the Nali Kali approach thinks that they have only been able to break the ‘physical’ barriers. Overcoming the ‘intellectual’ barriers, by which he means the expected learning levels, is yet to be achieved. The teachers acknowledge that not knowing the Lambani language is an impediment in interacting with the children from these communities in the early grades. They employ multi-grade instructional settings which help them to overcome this challenge to a certain extent. But the large class size—about 60 students in one class—compounds this problem. The school wants to hire more teachers. They have full faith that the community, whose goodwill they have earned with their hard work, would support the school with financial and human resources.

Conclusion

It is a popular myth among large sections of people that rural communities are not interested in the education of their children. Everyone would like their children to receive the best education that they can afford. The circumstances inside and outside the school decide how much the communities can contribute to the school. Schools are in the best position to take initiatives in this direction. When a dynamic leader like Achchappa Gouda assumes this responsibility, there is really nothing that can stop the transformation that they desire from taking place and GHPS Jumalapur Thanda is the best example of this.

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