Voice from the desert

By | Dec 13, 2012

I grew up in Bhagwanpura, a remote village located deep in the heart of the inhospitable Thar Desert. Situated in the catchment area of the Bilaspur dam, the village was not accessible by road. I never attended school as a child. I spent my childhood herding my family's goats and taking them to the forest to graze. Every day on the way to the forest, I would pass the village of Salari. I struck up an acquaintance with a few children who lived there. These children told me about their experiences in school. My uncle's son, who took lessons from a teacher in the village, would come home and brag to his friends about how one day he would become an officer. These stories intrigued me. Soon I developed a longing to go to school.

My resolve to get an education was strengthened by the following incident. My father had taken a loan from a bank but our family's dire financial circumstances made it impossible for us to repay the loan. One day the bank manager arrived at our village in a car and started looking for my father. Word about this got to my father and he ran away with the rest of the family, leaving me alone in the house with the goats. The bank manager arrived and dragged me out of the house and into his car.

He took me to the main market of the village and made me bend in the 'murga' position in front of everyone. The murga (chicken) position involves squatting, and then bringing the arms between the legs and holding the ears. I had to stay in this position for three hours. The humiliation made me realise that the bank manager was able to do this because he was educated and I was not. I was determined to remedy the situation.

I started asking the children who passed through the jungle while going to school to teach me. At first, they refused. I had to threaten them with the stick I used to herd my goats for them to finally agree. Every day after their school gave out, I would wait for them with my goats. I would learn a letter a day. I used my stick as chalk and the ground as a slate. These children taught me for a couple of years. I was not sure if I had learned, anything until one day during Ramayan Paath, a continuous reading session of Ramcharitmanas, I picked up a book of the Ramayan lying around and read four lines. I was elated. I was literate at last.

In 1978, there was a famine in our village. The government started public works programmes to provide employment and wages during that period. I also participated in some of these programmes. On the day wages were being distributed, instead of giving me Rs 60 I was given Rs 75. I gave Rs. 60 to my family and kept the 15.

Those fifteen rupees proved invaluable for me. I saw an advertisement for a book for learning English, in a magazine. I ran to the post office with my money and sent a postcard to the publisher ordering the book. The book arrived after a few days. I read it intently, memorising new English words every day. I would go and tell the other children in the village who studied in class 7-8 what I had learnt. Some children remarked that I knew more than them and advised me to write the class 8 exam.

They told me to speak to Khureishi sahib. When I met Khureishi sahib he offered to teach me after school hours. He taught me for a month after which he told me that I was ready to write the class 8 exam now. I asked him to help me get admission in the government school in the village. He told me that there was a strike in that school and that I should therefore get admitted in a private school in Dooni. This was in 1981. When I went to the private school they told me that I could be admitted only in class 6. That year I came first in class. I asked the school if I could be promoted to class 8 but they refused. Feeling disheartened, I would go to school but not attend class.

During this period, I met a government schoolteacher who told me he could help me get admitted in class 8 in a school in Deoli. He accompanied me to a private school, Prem Kalpana, in Deoli and spoke to the principal there. The principal spoke to me for a while and then asked if I would like to write the class 10 Board exam. I was elated. I started preparing furiously for the Board exam. In 1982, I passed the class 10 Board exam. After graduating from school, I went on to do B.Com, M.Com and B.Ed.

After my B.Ed., my first posting was to Dadali in Barmer district. This village is nestled deep in the Thar Desert. I started the first school in this village. The first year only 10-12 children came to school. The next year around 50 children got admitted to the school. In 1994, I noticed a girl belonging to the Suthar community dropping her brother off to school every day. She was about 16 years old at the time. I encouraged her to start coming to school too and soon she was attending school. In 4-5 months, she learnt to read and write. Seeing her two more girls from the community also started coming to school. The Rajpurohit girl, Santosh, was around 18 years old. I was hesitant to teach her at first but she would not take no for an answer. In a short time, Santosh learnt to read and write. Her father who worked in Pune came by to thank me when he visited the village. He had said, "Masterji, you have made the impossible possible. My daughter who was illiterate till recently now sends me 2-3 letters every month".
In 1996, I got transferred back to my village, Bhagwanpura. The teacher in the village was not conducting classes in the school building. When I enquired about the reason for this, I was told that the school building had not been inaugurated. I went to the school building and found it dilapidated, covered by babul bushes. A bunch of children from the village assisted me in clearing up and pruning the bushes. In around four days’ time the area had been cleared. Classes started being held in the building. The school had started with 15 children. Today, there are 48. No child from this village studies in a private school from class 1 to 5. I teach classes 3, 4 and 5. I tried to use whatever I had learnt during trainings in my classroom practice. I tried to create my own teaching-learning material but since I cannot draw well I now stick to readymade ones. We have also started a tree planting drive in the school. I try to involve children in such activities to make school more fun for them. In my own way I try to make a difference.

(As told by Sowdan Singh to Devendra Joshi, Block Academic Resource Person, Jaipur and published in the August 2011 edition of Kindle – the APF newsletter.)

Tags: illiteracy, perseverance, determination

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