Against all odds

By | Mar 30, 2013

Four rooms and the same facilities as other schools in the area, but a single step into the school and you know there’s something that sets it apart from the others. The reason? Nimai Chand Majhi — a teacher who lives and breathes the school. It is no wonder that the school gets talked about in the whole district.

Our journey to the school in Udhamsingh nagar, took us through fields and long stretches of ‘kachcha’ roads. Through an open door, I see a teacher explaining the concept of distance to students who pay rapt attention. After the class, I was introduced to him and Nimai Chand and I walk around the school, surrounded by fields, a forest and a river, while he shares with me his story...

When I'd come here in 1995 there were only 26 children from class 1 to class 5. Children from the village and nearby areas were enrolled in another school. It was a challenge to get the children to come to this school. I remember going from house to house to convince parents to send their children to our school, informing them that our school would shut down if our village children did not enrol. But the parents all seemed to share the same concern – the school’s teachers were always late! How could their children understand the importance of school, if the teachers themselves disrespected it? Unfortunately, they were right.

The school, the attitude of the teachers...we had to work hard, work together, to make ourselves and the school worthy of their trust. So, I spoke with the other teachers. I realised that setting the right example would be a better way to get everyone else on board, so I made sure I reached school on time every day. And you have to know that in the rains this was a hard thing to do. At times I'd have to carry the cycle on my shoulders for around three kms to reach the school. In the holidays, I'd go to various houses to try and convince them to send their children to our school. I did this about seven times and the admissions did go up, but not by much. I didn't give up.

We spent the year doing up the school to make it a place the villagers would respect. We got benches and desks made for the school. Students were given badges, ties, and belts to give them the sense of belonging. We would encourage our students to attend school every day and when they were absent I would go to their house and pick them up on my cycle and bring them to school.

Slowly, but steadily, the number of students in our school increased, to an extent that the private school in the area shut down, with our admission at 250!

Nimai Chand took the meaning of a ‘teacher’ to a whole new level. Even when he fractured his leg and had to wear a plaster, he insisted on keeping the school open so as not to disrupt the classes. As the only teacher in the school, he decided to stay in the school so as not to have to commute. While he stayed in school, he took the initiative to hold extra classes for the students who needed additional help in specific subjects.
With the size of the school growing, two new teachers were appointed. And if these teachers took a long leave of absence, two others were appointed to ensure that classes would continue and learning would not stop. Students from Nimai Chand’s school have gone on to study at Navodaya Vidyalayas and other similar schools.

When I began teaching here, I was warned that school was often broken into and the equipment stolen. This was obviously a big problem because funds were hard to come by and replacing stolen equipment over and over again was definitely not possible. After my appointment, even with the precautions taken, there was a burglary in the school. Locks were broken and students’ record books and furniture thrown all over the place. Villagers insisted that I file a complaint with the police. Complaints had been filed previously as well but that had not stopped the burglaries from happening. Instead of calling the police, I called all the villagers to the school and told them that the burglars were among them. “If you continue to steal and spoil the children’s work, the government will shut the school down and then...where will your children go?” Since then there have not been any more break-ins.

It is time for me to leave and just before doing so I ask him how we can go about increasing community participation in schools. He replies, “Take teachers from the community itself and that will solve eighty percent of the problem.” Recently, the school celebrated its first annual day. It was the first celebrated government school annual day in the district. Thanks to the efforts of Nimai Chand, the village community were proud of the school and felt that it was a part of their community. Various organizations and officials attended the event and once again, the school became the talk of the town.

Listening to Nimai Chand’s efforts against the odds brings to mind these lines from a poem...

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\text{When the wings are in place, it is the encouragement that gives flight.}
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Ranjana, from Azim Premji Institute for Assessment and Accreditation in Delhi, and Vijay Maurya and Deepak Purohit from Azim Premji Institute for Learning and Development, Udham Singh Nagar, had visited this school on work and wanted to share with others the work done by Nimai Chand. The pictures have been clicked by Vijay Maurya.

Tags: effort, difficulty, commitment, community, dedication

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