

# First ~~Generation~~ Learner

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**Pratichi (India) Trust**

**In association with: Child Rights and You (C.R.Y)**

*Sisura ki pichiye para?*

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## **Introduction**

Following the conventional train of thought and going by the institutional procedures, the role of a primary teacher is often reduced to that of an unimportant worker's. A primary teacher is featured as a taken-for-granted worker who is merely instrumental in carrying out orders from concerned authorities. His experience hardly counts while chalking out the syllabi, framing the teaching method or deciding upon the policies that concern education. This book proves how intransparent this traditional and outdated way of thinking really is! Here two primary teachers Moley Bhattacharyya and Tapas Bhattacharyya have exercised their thoughts and penned down their experiences based on their personal research on education, pedagogy, children's mind, social problems regarding unequal childhood and much more. They have shown us a way how teachers and parents can work together in helping children bloom, take their first steps into the arena of learning and eventually grow up as a self reliant, independent individual. This book bears testimony that there is no such thing as first generation learner; each child is actually a first learner in her own right. In association with CRY (Child Rights and You), Pratichi has organized research oriented activity workshops on school education in Birbhum. This publication is an off shoot of these workshops. Documenting teachers' experience is an integral part of this initiative. Everyone at Pratichi has worked wholeheartedly in this publication, but contributions of Susmita Bandopadhyay, Soumik Mukhopadhyay and Piyali Pal deserve special mention. I acknowledge their contribution with pleasure and gratitude.

Manabi Majumdar

Director

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## **A Few words**

There seems to be an all encompassing negativity around. Every question, here, is answered with a 'no'. There is a general belief that nothing actually happens here. This cynicism often reflects the gap between the ideal and the real. To be on the right track, the distance from what we think will happen and what has actually happens irks us. But if we can do away with these negative feelings and sit down to analyze the present scenario we would not fail to notice quite a number of positive activities happening, despite a lot being left undone. These activities are indicators of success. Besides analyzing the lapses, if we could spare some time reviewing these little achievements then the situation would surely not seem so desperate.

Though in limited expanses, Pratichi (India) Trust is researching these numerous little success and achievements in the arena of primary education which apparently remain unnoticed. In some remote areas in Birbhum, activities concerning school development and research are being conducted simultaneously. Some of these areas are largely inhabited by tribal communities. This attempt has been centred on a few Government run primary school and the credit for the success goes to none but the teachers of these primary schools.

As we know, Right to Free and Compulsory Education, 2010 has been in practice since April 1, 2010. It was decided that it would take 3 years to implement the act. But in reality, the situation offers little scope for hope. On the other hand many of us are not aware how an organization like Pratichi is gradually bringing about an improvement in the situation. Acting like a catalyst, Pratichi seeks to motivate primary school teachers to do what is best for their pupils and the institution as a whole.

Among Pratichi's initiatives, the attempt to improve primary school teaching qualitatively is especially noteworthy. This includes the attempt to understand the children's unique way of thinking, parental participation in school functioning and proper working of the Mid-day meal system. The primary teachers have documented this entire experience in workshops. This documented experience, thoughts and ideas are being published by Pratichi (India) Trust. This is indeed a unique and commendable effort. Over the past few years, we representing CRY – (Child Rights and You) have been collaborating in this project and feel grateful being a part of the entire effort.

Our area supervisor Sri Atindranath Das, my colleague Sri Jitendranath Rath and I together wish all the very best to this worthy initiative. We heartily congratulate Sri Kumar Rana and his team for their sincere efforts.

Let me end with a few words of Prof. Amartya Sen. He said, "We cannot do away with injustice from our lives completely, but it can be reduced to a considerable extent--that is indeed no mean feat!"

Here's wishing all the best to Pratichi and all the school teachers.

Let us join hands to bring a positive sustainable change in the lives of the children.

With Best wishes

Satyagopal De

Associate General Manager---Development support

CRY-Child Rights and You

## Time Past

It was around 1970, when 80 percent of the country's population comprised ordinary citizens who hovered under the poverty line. The literacy rate was around 30-40 percent. Let us now go back to a village in Birbhum district in West Bengal during those days. More than 40 years back the children from high castes, moneyed and aristocrat families only could go to primary and lower school. A few children from dalit families were also seen in classrooms. But not one child belonging to the adivasis could be seen anywhere near the school premises. The children from the backward communities scarcely passed out of the primary school. After a short stint they were literally lost from the education scenario. During this time the primary schools functioned in the morning. The schools were situated in the middle of the villages. The little localities of the villages had their foundation in caste or community. There were Brahmin para (hamlet), bayen para, muslim para and others. One could separate these localities into two distinct categories. First, the so called high caste para was inhabited by the educated, aristocratic and moneyed families. And the other para was obviously inhabited by dalit, backward communities and backward Muslim families. There were numerous forms of discriminations that permanently divided these two broad groups. When it came to touching and sharing food with one another it caused a lot of trouble, especially with the womenfolk of the village. It was almost a sin for the people of high castes to drink water touched or carried by low caste or Muslim villagers.

These people of the lower caste were primarily agricultural labourers or sharecroppers. They worked in other's land and helped in growing crops. For their efforts agricultural labourers would receive wage and the sharecroppers a percentage of the produce. The farming household would grow their own rice and make muri (puffed rice crispies eaten as snacks) for family consumption. Sharecroppers and agricultural labourers would be instrumental in growing the crop required for family consumption. Women of those household shouldered these responsibilities. While processing the rice sometimes they worked in their master's household and sometimes they brought it back to their own homes to do the processing. It is ironical to note that the low caste labourers carried the water required for boiling the rice. They tossed and turned the rice with their feet while drying them in the sun. Then they would carry the unhusked rice to the local husking mills to make the rice. Following that they would pack the processed rice in sacks and send them back to their master's place. The men would carry the sacks and deposit them at a particular corner of the master's household. Once the sacks got deposited the people from the lower class relinquished all rights associated with the rice. They could not touch it anymore.

In the same vein, we can make out that education was also a stronghold of the people of the higher castes. Though the demand for minimum literacy has remained an agenda since pre-

independence, quite a number of national leaders having vouched in its favour but very little actual development had taken place to improve the figures.

After independence when the Indian Constitution was adopted, the Directive Principles prescribed that within the next decade all children till 14 years of age should receive minimum education. Besides setting up a few education commissions, achieving compulsory education for all children still remained a distant cry. During this period the political parties believed in upholding the demands of their chosen political kin instead of promoting general welfare. So the developments were few and far between. Like untouchability, this political practice has not been discontinued completely.

Since the village paras were located in a particular way, whilst one group of children rushed happily to school, the other children belonging to the same age group trooped to work in different households. In village parlance they were called "bagal". From the tender age the children had to shoulder the responsibility of tending the cattle and goats and perform other tasks at the master's household. They would be compensated with food and meager wages. It might have occurred to them that though they belonged to the same age group and village, why such gross discrimination? It was difficult to decipher an answer during their childhood. But once they grew up some of them could understand what divides the two groups. The Indian constitution aimed at compulsory education for every child till the age of fourteen, yet the contemporary political parties, leaders and the so called "educated" gentlemen perpetually lacked the will to bridge this gap.

During this time women's literacy was in a pitiable state. Girls from the backward communities, especially those from the dalit and adivasis, hardly had any presence in school. In fact even upper caste girls faced terrible opposition within families once it came to going to schools. Little girls from dalit and adivasi families often worked as domestic helps in others' households; on the other hand, girls from upper class performed domestic chores at their own homes.

### **Time Present**

Of late the media and a handful of intellectual are often seen making a hue and cry about how the education system has gone to the dogs and how students nowadays are wallowing in a pitiable condition; it is only the mid-day meal that draws them to school. It is for their and the baffled teachers' information that for many rich village households it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep livestock at home, since they are not finding anybody to tend them. It is also becoming tough to find young domestic help to look after babies. This additional work of taking the livestock to graze or looking after babies have become an extra burden on the members of the family. It is not as if children are not being born in villages. A little investigation would

reveal that groups of children who earlier worked as menial labours are now students in the local Primary or sub junior schools.

Each primary school now boasts of survey reports where a child's name gets registered once s/he is born. The teacher keeps a note if a new child comes to live in the village or moves out of it. Assistance from active villagers and enthusiastic teachers has ensured that all the children of school going age actually get enrolled. The crisis of domestic help for doing menial household jobs is an offshoot of the high enrollment drive. The latest child survey report of Sarva Shiksha Mission (2011-12) testifies that about 96-98 percent of the children (of the age of 5+) have been enrolled in primary schools. Some children belonging to the 5+ age group could not be admitted for not fulfilling the age criteria during admissions; they would be admitted in the next academic session. This figure, by no means, can be ignored for this proves that the education system is making its way among the unlettered masses in silent strides. Surely, all of us agree that the success of the system lies in creating an opportunity for all children to come to school and make best of it.

Thus it becomes evident that first step to primary education is obviously "enrolment" which in our state has met with considerable success. But what about the quality of education imparted? We need to put in quite a lot of thought to it. Especially in those schools where the children from the backward communities are more in number, the teachers find it exceptionally challenging to maintain quality of education imparted. Parental enthusiasm, schools within safe distance, introduction of mid-day meal and other reasons have spurred children to come to school. Yet they often fail to learn what they are expected to do. This can escalate frustration. What good is enrollment if the child fails to learn? But this can never be the only truth; there are truths beyond which can be lessons for all of us.

Drawing on the experiences of a primary teacher and from the news that comes in, it becomes clearer that while majority of schools are unable to haul students to desired standard of learning, some schools are actually reaching the desired level of excellence. Of course this inference needs further thoughts and analysis. Inevitably there would be questions. Are these schools' success banking upon their following the regulations charted by the government? Are the parents playing a specialized role in improving the school? Are the government officials paying additional attention to the development of such schools? Do these schools have geographical advantage? What about the school's properties? Do these schools owe their success to an amalgam of these reasons? Can this success be replicated elsewhere? Though valid it is exceedingly difficult to find complete answers to these questions. But as a take off point these questions can act as an excellent springboard. Come, let us make a start.



## **The Act of Understanding**

From earlier experiences we have learnt that to improve school and the quality of teaching we do not need any additional facilities. A basic infrastructure, healthy administration, enthusiastic teachers determined to succeed can create magic out of nothing. Effort and necessity together usher success. A simple example can bring out the truth. An unlettered rickshaw puller can act as a guide to foreigners and can show them around the city without any formal knowledge of the foreign tongue. The foreigners' effort to understand the rickshaw-puller coupled with the rickshaw-puller's necessity for money leads both to a desired destination. It sounds difficult, yet in reality is easy enough. The same theory works in favour of a school when the advantage of school education is brought home to the parents. When parents effectively internalize the fact that like other basic needs, education is essential to one's life they would ensure that the child comes to the school regularly. Regular attendance is, of course, the most important step to improving a child's educational standard. Indirectly, this ensures a success on the part of the teacher as well. Other systemic procedures also contribute to the changes. Hence, it is important to leave behind the idea that success can only be achieved when all the ingredients are near at hand. In spite of visible lacks quite a lot can be garnered. This book will explore this issue further.

## **The Strength of Bond**

Even after the parents start sending the children to school regularly, they can still drop out. To prevent this dropping out, there should be different localized plan. It is important to remember that when a five-year-old leaves home to come to school s/he is full of fear and inhibitions. The child has learnt about the school and teachers from siblings and other children. He feels that the teacher will play the part of the parent at school. S/he feels all his whims and fancies would be catered to here. In short the child has already created an imaginary school within. Once within the premises child tries to match the real school with the one from his imagination. Therefore, when a child first comes to school instead of directly introducing books, s/he should be given some time to get used to the school atmosphere. The child may not be familiar with alphabet or numbers but s/he is aware of a number of things. Discussing those instills confidence in children. Song, dance, rhymes, and stories can engage them and encourage spontaneous participation. Thus the child discovers the imaginary school in reality and starts loving the school wishing to return to it every morning. But if the child's ego is hurt in school in anyway s/he may lose interest in school forever. Therefore the first few days are indeed crucial once it comes to the child's continuing in school. If the teacher succeeds in creating a joyful learning atmosphere within the classroom keeping aside the impediments, then the child will accept the teacher as a close kin and look up to him/her as an alternative parent (See Box 1).

Our limited knowledge of children coupled with the vast repertoire of experiences of other teachers tells us the same truth over and over again (See Box 3).

In the first few days of schooling the child looks for a kin inside the school premises and closely scrutinizes every move of this friendly soul. During this time if the teacher helps the child to brush the hair, cut nails or praise any little gesture made by him/her, the child gets elated and makes it a point to elaborate this to his/her family with great alacrity. A kind word or a little gesture on the part of the teacher can strengthen the bond dramatically. Once the bond is firmly established alphabet and number card can do the rest.

#### Box 1

Second standard. Arithmetic class. A girl-student could not split 17 into tens and units. Though she could rattle off numbers from 1 to 100 she found it difficult to break down the numbers like 23, 47 and 53 into units and tens. She was being reprimanded for this at home too. In school her friends simply dismissed her saying, 'Oh, she can't do it.' She echoed the same words herself. She was trying to learn but somehow accepted her inability. The teacher tried to teach her in a number of ways and felt frustrated when none worked until he brought into class some ice cream sticks. Each stick stood for a unit and ten tied together in a bundle stood for a ten. Thus 23 meant two bundles of 10 sticks and three single ones. After a few days there was uproar in the class. When asked, a pupil informed that the same girl was performing magic tricks with match sticks. Asked to perform, she bundled matchsticks and explained two tens and three make 23. She has learnt it out of sheer curiosity and was savouring the joy of discovery. Then she asked a tricky question, "Sir, can you turn 11 into 1?" When the teacher expressed his inability, she wrote O-N-E with 11 matchsticks. The teacher found tears pricking in his eyelids. Never in his distant dream had he imagined that a child can discover the joy of learning following his teaching methods. Hence, it is unfair to expect each child to learn at the same pace following similar procedure. Each child's growth depends on his/her ability to cope, his likes and dislikes. Once we learn to keep track of his like and dislikes it becomes infinitely easier to teach. Many a time we impose on the child what we feel is correct to the child's immense disgust.

When a child from the third standard could not read or pronounce properly, it worried the teacher. She consulted with other teachers and took a little effort in introducing wordplay to introduce spellings. The child enjoyed the fun element and started learning. The child who refused to come and sit at the front row now brimmed with newfound confidence and emphasized, "I can read." Situational difficulties can hinder a child's progress but it is never too late to make up.

#### **Building Bridges**

Affectionate gestures from teachers surely influence the students. But it also has sustained effect on parents. They repeat the same to their neighbours and others. An invisible bridge of companionship between parents and teacher comes into being beyond the teacher's knowledge. The youth of the village also find it necessary to bond with the particular teacher. We can take the example of Mohula Primary School within the western circle of Bolpur in Birbhum district. Primarily (1998), the school had nothing to boast about the standard of teaching-learning. The parents had nothing to do with the school. The school suffered from lack of teachers. Under such dire circumstances, the school successfully veered towards success simply by building bridges between teachers, students and parents. Villagers from all communities came forward to join hands to touch heights of success. The people loved the school with all their hearts. Since the school did not have enough land of its own poor farmers extended their help by donating land for herbal gardens, kitchen garden and flower beds around the school building. The people build a fence around the school to grow trees and greenery around. Mango, guava, banana from those trees fed the children and not a single incident of theft was reported. To ensure that children had fish as a part of their mid-day meal fishes were bred in a nearby tank. The school has made its way in Sarva Shiksha Mission's documentary. In the academic session of 2005-06, Sarva Shiksha Mission and others helped the school to build a new house for itself. During this time in Sriniketan Fair the school participated in the agricultural exhibition and won three prizes competing with regular farmers. Anandabazar Patrika and research papers of the Pratichi Trust made it a point to highlight the successes of this exceptional institution. Not only did the children from this school do well in studies, but they excelled in sports as well. The children did well in circle and district levels and made way to the state level too. In order to ensure that children from the backward communities reached their age-appropriate standards in lessons, the youth of santhal community started free evening classes. The youth provided voluntary service to ensure that the children did well.

Similar enthusiasm surrounding a school could be witnessed in Bamnigram near Saithian in Birbhum district. Bamnigram Primary school catered to children from five surrounding villages. The villages were Joramullah (inhabited by backward communities), Bhalaha and Krishnapur (inhabited by low caste Hindus primarily migrated from Bangladesh), Chhutordangal (inhabited by Sadgopes and scheduled caste communities) and Bamnigram (inhabited by Brahmins, scheduled caste and adivasis). The primary school stood in the middle of the village in the locality where Brahmins and Sadgopes lived. Adivasis and other backward communities lived a little far off about 1-2 km away. Despite the distance, the poor road conditions especially during monsoons prevented the children from attending school. Though electricity had reached the village, not all the areas enjoyed its advantages. The villagers were predominantly farmers but economy was dominated by social divisions based on class. The Brahmins and Sadgopes were primarily land owners, but some of them had jobs as well. The adivasis and scheduled class

people were farm labours or did other menial works. A large number of them migrated seasonally to work elsewhere. People who had migrated from Bangladesh were mostly weavers.

Previously school education was reserved for a privileged section of society who lived close to the school premises. The children from the nearby villages were enrolled but seldom remained present. Mid-day meal programme turned the tables entirely.

When the project finally kicked off, teachers as well as others had inhibitions whether eating meals at school would disrupt studies. Due to infrastructural lapses and lack of experiences the initial implementation of the project met with several difficulties. But once the villagers and the SHGs joined hands it was not difficult to witness a dramatic escalation in children's attendance. It seemed that the schools had turned a new leaf altogether. Yet some problems continued to persist.

In spite of serious attempts on the part of the teachers, some pupils continued to lag behind in studies. Once they identified the problems, teachers consulted with the villagers who were sincerely dedicated to the cause of spreading education and worked on solutions. After thorough discussions the teachers accompanied by the village youth went on home visits in the evening and found that the children did not revise the everyday lessons at home. Their learning was limited exclusively to the school hours. These children belonged essentially to unlettered parents. Neither did they have electricity at homes, nor did they have enough money to buy kerosene to light lamps. Though it has been proven scientifically that lessons should be finished within school hours, owing to pressures of completing a huge syllabus and lack of pre primary level learning the teachers cannot completely do away with home works and revisions at home.

Reviewing the scenario the group decided to initiate free evening coaching classes in four localities. The educated youth of the village, who had either dropped out from high school or college, volunteered to teach the children without any remuneration. The schoolteachers, villagers and other well-wishers provided with every other support. The entire initiative had an extensive positive impact on the children. Some old men and women also showed interest in joining the evening classes. Some of the mothers who had dropped out from primary school started studying with the children and succeeded in learning to read and write. The villagers and some well wishers contributed to build huts for evening classes. Solar lights were used to light up the classrooms.

These far reaching initiatives resulted in children's regular attendance in schools. Every locality had its own aged member who escorted the children to the school and communicated the reasons for absenteeism. This network of positive initiatives heightened the quality of education and community participation to unimaginable levels. The school meetings boasted of

participation of all the mothers and guardians. The constructively analyzed the problems of teaching-learning methods and tried to carved out workable solution.

During 2008-09 a school dropout girl was identified who was forced to leave school due to familial opposition. Due to sincere efforts on the part of the teachers and villagers, the girl, Santana Das, was brought back to school. At present after she is on her way of passing out from college. Later Santana along with others played an important role in raising educational standards of the children and mobilize efforts for running an evening coaching centre, sports activities and cultural programmes. It is important to note that the two guiding forces that helped these two schools to prosper were Birbhum Primary School Association and Pratchi (India) Trust's valuable assistance. Other schools in Birbhum like Baridpur Primary school, South Harirampur Primary school and others are trying to match the footsteps of their successful predecessor. These schools provide ample proof what teacher-parent relationship can do to uplift a school.

### **A child's world**

Difficulty in retention and dropping out are perennial problems to primary school teachers. Actually a child can drop out from studies despite being regularly present in school if the school fails to mould his inner being. If the class, school, environment, pedagogical process, lessons does not leave a lasting imprint on the child's mind, then her presence in school cannot be justified in any way. To touch his mind and soul the classrooms should be friendly, textbooks interesting, TLMs attractive and teaching methods child friendly. Once these simple rules are kept in mind, a child would be drawn to lessons in no time. If these do not work, it becomes important or the teacher to be intimate with him/her.

Let us take an example. It can often be noticed that despite following every pedagogical method a few students cannot catch up with others. These children cannot concentrate in the Mathematics class. The parents inform that they neglect studies at home. Since they have nobody to monitor their lessons at home they spend the study time playing. Next day, as an experiment they are asked which game they liked to play. Pat came the reply, cricket. The teacher joined their game of cricket during recess. They count exactly how many catches they take. The game continued every recess. After a week it became clear that not only did the boys learn how to count but they have learnt to tell greater and lesser among numbers. The problem which seemed insoluble in class was easily sorted out in the playground. Getting acquainted with a child's world can solve a number of puzzles which apparently do not have any theoretical solutions.

Box-2

Excerpts from a famous book on education

...The headmaster always told the parents, 'Always send your child to school in his/her worst dress.' The reason behind this was that this dress gave the child all the freedom to play. The child could dirty or tear her clothes without being afraid of being scolded at home. A good dress always scares the child that it might get filthy or torn during games. The headmaster felt that this was very wrong.

...'Did you know that you are really a good girl!' The headmaster told this every time he met Totto Chan. This made Totto Chan hop and jump and say, 'Don't I know! I am really a very good girl.' She believed it with all her heart and soul. Of course she was a good girl and she has been this good for a really long time. She behaved wonderfully with everyone she met, helped everyone around especially her disabled friends.

...Every school day was fun filled! Totto Chan waited for morning to come so that she could go to school. After school she narrated the day's tales to Rokay, Mother and Father. The new adventures, fun and all the details were narrated. At last Mother would say, 'That's enough my dear. Let's stop here and finish our dinner.' Even after she got acquainted with the new school her stories never seemed to end. Her mother felt elated at her gaiety.

-----Totto Chan, Tetsuko Kurowonagi , National Book Trust, India

### Lessons sans fear

Lessons should not seem a burden to children. Instead children's experience and their own worldview should find their way in lessons so that they themselves subconsciously become a part of it. The children's point of view should be treated with due importance to make the lessons simple and effective. This is why educationists try to focus on stress free education. They emphasize on reducing the weight of text books and curtailing the enormity of the syllabi. It needs to be ensured that the children accept their lessons with fun and happiness. Education should pave their journey from a world of their own to the adult world. We need to remember every child has a mind of her own. She is a discoverer whose home and the environment around her is her laboratory where the active mind constantly fiddles around. Once he comes to school a bigger lab opens up when gets an opportunity to experiment with the outer world.

In new education studies, it is understood that every child comes to the school with some knowledge. It is unwise to consider them *tabula rasa*. Children from backward communities or families are often quiet, hardly opening their mouths. If the teachers help them open up then they are bound to come across weird yet interesting stories. Now if these stories become a part of the lessons, teaching becomes a joyful experience indeed. Instead of gagging the child with lessons, the teacher acts as a guide. If a child can master reading-writing skills learning a handful of stories and poems, is there any need to force-feed them with dozens of lessons!

Their reading skill will lead them to further studies whereas rote learning will provoke boredom and disgust.

### **To see, to hear**

The child's world is not merely limited to home and school. Hence little lessons on nature study helps develop their thought processes which can be used in multilevel learning. Nature study can help them learn science, history, geography, even creative writing and mathematics. The high point of this study is that the children enjoy this to its hilt. It has many real life advantages as well. In 2004 the nature study class enabled the children of Mohula Primary School of Bolpur Western Circle to create their own wall magazine. The other schools of the district followed the school's example. Later they were compiled to make a magazine called 'Tepantar'. Apart from this Sattor Gram Panchayat of Bolpur Western Circle published a magazine called 'Nabadiganta' compiling the creative writings of school children of the locality. Later Sarva Shiksha Mission and Pratichi Trust published a compilation of children's write-up garnered from these magazines.

### **Box 3**

#### **Snippets from Teachers' write-ups**

Hasanujjaman studies in standard three. He is irregular in school. When asked about his absence he says that his mother fetches him to gather leaves for daily fuel. I met his mother. Mother insisted that the boy never paid any heed to chores. But a neighbor insisted that the boy was telling the truth. Like Hasanujjam there are other children who are irregular. I felt that poverty would never leave these children alone. Later I thought of summoning a mother's meeting. The meeting was held. We discussed in details about a mother's role in child's education. The mothers guided me through and through. I put responsibility on some mothers to ensure that children from different localities reached school on time. The success was tremendous.

Md. Hefajur Rahman, Teacher, Maldah

I set a task for my standard IV students---I asked them to find a rhyming line in Bengali for two lines I had set myself. The first was, 'Gachhe gachhe ful futechhe (The trees are blossoming...)' and the second 'Holud pakhi, holud pakhi (O, yellow bird...'. The children wrote 'The trees are blossoming/ The bees eagerly rush towards them.' Some wrote, 'O, yellow bird/ Will you come to me?' I was appalled to see that a child from an impoverished family who hardly opened her mouth write, 'The trees are blossoming/ the sheuli flowers make a pretty sight.' Tears pricked

into my eyelids. I had dismissed her to the 'weak' group. These are the rewards which make my teaching career prosperous.

Ratna Bhattacharyya, Teacher, 24 Parganas (South)

I met Saraswati Hazra when I was teaching Bengali in Standard I. When all the others were trying something or the other, Saraswati went on harping, 'I cannot write' and put her books and slate inside the satchel. I tried to encourage her but she just could not manage. Later I asked the assistant teacher whether she knew the child and what could have been her reasons for behaving so. She said that the girl's mother had died a month back and her father had remarried already. Next day once I reached class I called the child and asked, 'Did your mother feed you before coming to school?' She replied in affirmative. I fondled her hair and said, 'You are really a good girl.' She was elated and stood close by. I asked her to start writing like everybody else. She seemed interested and started writing with my help.

Subimal Ghosh, Teacher, Murshidabad

The children can share stories with their classmates, they can describe the incident of witnessing a spook in details, understand the rules of a new game with utmost ease the only thing that seems tricky to them is everyday lessons! This happens because lessons are not taught like games, especially when it comes to teaching History and Geography. We, the teachers, should be held responsible for not making the studies interesting enough for them.

Nabanita Sarkar, Teacher, Maldah

I could not follow the students who come to my class. How can I teach them if I do not know either Rajvanshi or Sadri? I was quite depressed. I started thinking about a feasible solution. After finishing my class I continued to ruminate on this during lunch break. How could I teach them if I could not communicate with them? I decided that I must learn Rajvanshi and Sadri if I wanted to teach them Bengali. I have been able to learn Rajvanshi but haven't been able to grasp Sadri fully. It has helped me to learn to communicate with my students. I can understand what they feel and want. What amazes me now that I have learnt two languages just by talking to the children! I had come to teach but have been turned into a student---now my students are my teachers. This turning of table has brought me closer to the by miles.

Kajal Sutradhar, Teacher, Jalpaiguri

(Penwalk, experiences of Primary Teachers, Pratichi Institute, Kolkata, 2012)



## Time Future

It is a fact universally acknowledged that children are the world's greatest resource. It is often said one who does not like flowers or children are not fit to be one of the human race. Hence if the teachers are not loving and caring enough to their guide their pupil it is no less than a crime.

We often say, 'Today's child is tomorrow's citizen', to turn this aphorism to reality we need to build them into socially conscious human beings. If we want our society to survive peacefully we need to inculcate the seeds of social awareness, proper value system, self respect in today's children. We adults are becoming selfish by the day; the value system that is lost on us should be revived within our children. It is obvious that the first step towards becoming a responsible starts at the primary schools that are run by the state or is funded by the state. It is regrettable that teachers who are responsible for the children are often called away for quite a number of days for other jobs. This obviously hampers their day to day teaching. The teachers who are shouldering the responsibility of mainstreaming the backward children should be allowed to devote every school hour they can get on the children. The State has provided ample encouragement (like Nirmal Vidyalaya Puroshkar, Sishumitra Puroshkar, Shikshamitra) for preparing good students, similarly we wish that it would come to the assistance of all the teachers as they lay the foundation blocks of nation building process.

The law confirming the Right of Education has been made its way. We are hopeful that infrastructure and other problems will also get solved in due time. New ways of thinking, constant experimentation and the point of view which accepts the child as a complete human being should take the centre stage now. Our mind works in a rigid, inflexible way. Whenever we discuss Mid-day meal we tend to associate it with hunger. Classroom hunger is a stark reality yet the need of Mid-day meal is not limited to satiating the pangs of hunger. Every child irrespective of her family's financial status when at home eats the lunch. Therefore when the child is at school for a longer period it is obvious that she would lunch there. If we choose to view it thus, eating at school seems to be an obvious part of schooling. The same logic works for homework too. It is felt that homework is essential for good learning. But does it not impede upon the child's freedom? With proper infrastructural aid and sincere help from teachers primary school studies need not be dragged back at home. Syllabus, to us, is of supreme importance. While the rest of the world has tried to lessen the burden of studies in primary school, we in India have done just the opposite. But on an optimistic note, the debate is on and changes are making their way. We are hopeful that more positive changes will enrich us help pave way for personal experiences to seep in educational policy making procedure. The teacher's point of view is often overlooked when forming a policy for school education. But

teaching as a creative exercise engenders experiences that are worth paying attention to. It can be a learning exercise for other teachers as well.

Changes take time in materializing. The education system has improved with time. To perfect it we need active cooperation from teachers. Mainstreaming the 'backward' students is the toughest task that lay ahead of them. Our experience teaches us that there is nothing that can be labeled as 'backward', each child learns at her own pace. This simple recognition conjures individual opportunity for every child so that they can join hands with one another to turn themselves in to an educated, conscious nation.