

Story of the Jungle School Teacher

By [Sanjay Nautiyal](#) | Nov 11, 2019

When Sarita ji and I walked into the school (Basically it is a conical hut) premises, all the children around greeted us with their hands folded in Namaste, saying, 'Good morning' mam /sir. I put my bag down in the classroom and came outside again to welcome all the kids for their day at school. The school comes under forest reserve and prohibited for permanent construction. Currently, it operates out of classroom for all five classes. The walls are standing and made up by river stone and coated by cow dung, there are no windows, the floor constitute of bumpy, dried cement covered by stone wall and little carpets on which the children sit. There is no water connection in the school. Bhojan mata (cooking food for children) would go all the way down the hill to the river every day to get water, walking kilometers to get the children their living essentials. The obvious lack of concern about the school's fate in contrast to the little, singing children saddened me until I learnt, that with all the difference architecture and open spaces can make, and this seemingly stillborn school was alive and kicking. An energetic assistant teachers Mr. Sunil Dutt is also engaged with school process whole heartily.



Sarita Teacher – Her journey

She told me that it was her fifth year in the school and casually mentioned that she used to walk every day from Siggadi industrial area all the way to Siggadi shoat for five years. Not only did this mean great physical, daily endeavors to open the school, but it also meant that she, while walking through the Gurjar habitat, visited all the families' homes, got to know them and got their children to school. Her personal relationship with all the children and their families became clear in small and very significant ways. When she looked around and marked her register, she asked where one of the boys were. The students replied saying he didn't come along so she asked his neighbor to go and ask his mother why he hadn't come. She came back with the boy who was absent who sat down happily and gratefully, with no reprimand from the teacher, only understanding.

About her teaching-learning processes

Sarita ji told me about several children and recounted their stories. There was a little girl who had lost her father and whose family struggled to make enough to get from day to day. Yet, despite her penury she made sure that her relatives got her pencils and exercise books for her to work in school. Sarita ji regularly provides this to her students from her own money but, despite this, the beady eyed little girl still made sure she brought it on her own. She was one of the most vocal, expressive child in her class – although all the children were quite comfortable with speaking and voicing their thoughts - and her passion to be in the classroom and participate almost bubbled out of her dancing eyes and happy demeanor. For me, this child so invested in her education and so proud to be in school speaks volumes about the relationship Sarita ji has built with all these little ones. Their self-development has occurred to the crucial extent that they are confident in being themselves and voicing their thoughts and feelings. But, on top of this, many of the older ones have a determination and ambition of their own - so rarely seen with children from whom an original drive and dream is never expected or never allowed.



When attendance was taken, children did not only respond with 'Yes,' instead, they constructed whole sentences saying things like, 'My name is ___,' English is a language that Sarita ji has incorporated into the children's everyday speech. Common requests from the children, 'May I go to the toilet?', 'May I come in?' are said in English. Rather than the common notion that children should be given instructions in English, Sarita ji asks them to use the language to fulfill their own needs. In this way the language becomes normal and necessary too. One of the children, who had just joined the first year (a few weeks old in the school) raised his hand and asked, 'Go to Pani peene ' The way in which he is learning English – first for meaning- before he even understands each word and can segment his sentences is similar to how a child picks up his/ her mother tongue. When we see this type of learning naturally unfolding in front of us in schools, the process seems so organic. There is almost a sense that learning is happening in the "right" way, as if there is a treasure chest environment for the child to experience and discover as he/ she goes.



There were many remarkable details of Sarita ji's classroom that seemed to embody the foundation of teaching based on children's previous knowledge, dialogue and imagination. The fifth class pattered up to Sarita ji's desk with their Hindi lesson: a poem about rivers. She asked them to imagine with their eyes closed what would happen if a river flew off. She began by asking them what difficulties it would pose, to think of what they used water for. 'Swabbing the floors, washing the clothes, washing the dishes, drinking, fetching water,' they piped. Fetching the water struck me as telling of the children's lives: their non-negotiable labour for the family that is so matter of fact it seems, to them, like a function in itself. The children were talkative and tee-heed at the ideas of the reality they knew and the reason they had of the world being inversed as they imagined. They did not hesitate to answer, reveled in the interaction and left in delight to ponder and write about the logical leap they had imagined. Sarita ji perhaps unknowingly, had brought her children to have a dialogue where they questioned what they know to be real: they had engaged in fundamental critical thought through the fun of poetry. Sarita ji may not know about the complexities of critical thinking and its place in the aims of education; she may not intentionally construct her classes in this way; but what her class most indicates is that having a perspective that respects the child as a person and his/ her freedom to discover and discuss these explorations is at the crux of teaching young children. For them, at this stage, nothing is more important in school than liking and feeling comfortable with their teacher.

If the walls had ears in this jungle school, even though they are abandoned, they are witness to free children- learning far away from the normal cities and towns.

In conclusion

1. Sarita ji is a devoted teacher. With a determined expression on her face, she stated that "my life is devoted to the children".
2. Her relentless energy is quite contagious. She would accept if she did not know something and was willing to learn from children too. She said that children were forgivable, and they make mistakes. Among children, she also gained confidence to learn new things.
3. She showed respect when she spoke with children and responded to their question. She exclaimed that her belief is that children need opportunities and they will do what they are supposed to do. Her pedagogical practices reflected how she included children's natural way of learning into her lessons. She was aware of each child's trajectory and focused on the interest in learning besides the subject matter.
4. She was quite aware of the fact that trust is the most important factor that will bring parents closer to the school and eventually will support the child's education. She insisted that the village members did not discriminate between the boy child and the girl child at

such small age and she was inculcating this quality and using it to the benefit to educate children so that discrimination does not surface even as they grow up.



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