

DISSOLVING CASTE BOUNDARIES



Meena

This is not just the story of the Baghriya children. It extends to children from other excluded social groups who survive on the peripheries. They live in large numbers in cities, towns and villages across wide locations. Getting them to attend school is only the first battle won. How do you get them to engage in the class? How do you integrate a child who remains passive; at times fearful; has a poor self esteem; lacks confidence; is coping with the harshness of life at home and is often irregular for reasons beyond her control? These are some real and vital questions that many teachers confront.

Patan is a village with around 600 households. It is located along the highway between Jaipur and Ajmer at a distance of 15 kilometers from Kishangarh town. About 40 families from the Baghriya community, who are entrenched in socio-economic disadvantage and ostracised by the villagers, dwell in the shadows of untouchability on the outskirts of this village in modest dwellings. They provide the labour force for the village or take care of the livestock belonging to the better off villagers. Until 2011, not a single child from this basti had been enrolled in school. Over the past decade things have changed. Many Baghriya children attend school now. Yet, despite these changes they continue to live on the outskirts and linger at the bottom of the social ladder.

About a decade ago, Leelavati Yadav, a resident of Patan joined OELP. She ran the OELP learning Centre in the Government school. She also ran "Apna Pustakalaya" - OELP's library, three times in a week. Through this engagement Leela developed a passion for children's books. Her love of books captured the interest of children from the village and her library turned into a favourite haunt for them. However, not a single child from the Baghriya community ventured anywhere near the library.

Leela wanted to break these barriers. She was keen for the Baghriya children to start coming to her library. However, every time she went to their basti, the children just vanished into thin air and their reluctant parents remained suspicious. Leela persevered. Since the Baghriya children were afraid to come to her library, she decided to take her library to them. This ignited the wrath of her Yadav Community, who were horrified that one of their "bahus" would dare to engage with the socially ostracised Baghriya community. Leela refused to be cowed down. She found support in the children of Patan Village. Together, they began to take books to the Baghriya basti.



Meena and her friends enact a play for children from the Baghriya community



Meena's house

Leela's effort finally paid off and Meena* became the first Baghriya child to be enrolled in the Patan government school. Meena also started coming to the library. Over time, more children from her basti joined her. Today, Meena is in Grade 8. She is a confident learner. In the last few years, several children from her community have been

*name has been changed

enrolled in the school. Leela's efforts have now shifted to providing them with extra support so that they are able to engage meaningfully in the class. Squeezing in additional time for this is a constant struggle for Leela. To add to this, the children are irregular on account of the responsibilities that they shoulder at home, and so they struggle to keep up with their class.

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The OELP teacher reading a story book to children from the Bagriya Community

Leela says, the answer lies in making success achievable for each child. It means creating a classroom environment of acceptance, trust, and collaboration. She believes it is vital that a child does not feel threatened or afraid to make mistakes, for it is only then that she begins to engage and learn in real and meaningful ways. Once a child experiences success it can become a driving force that propels the child forward.