

# REACHING THE UNREACHED

Adapted from a case study  
by Bhivaram Jat

*Azad's story represents the story of thousands of vulnerable children like him for whom entry into school is just the beginning of a real struggle. It is the struggle of young children who grow up at the lower rungs of the social ladder. Children who do not have support for school-based learning at home. This is a struggle for crossing the bridge from exclusion to inclusion.*

The Kalbelias have been a nomadic people who roam through different villages to earn their daily bread. They beg for alms; sell gum and other wares or entertain people through snake shows or folk dances. Due to modernization their traditional modes of income are no longer viable, so of late, they have begun to settle in small hamlets or dhanis which are located outside villages. Their stigmatized past is perhaps the reason why the Kalbelias time and again face the question, "What do you have to do with schooling?"

Azad's is a Kalblia child who lives with his family in a village located on the highway close to Kishangarh town. Many private school buses ply on this highway. From time to time he looked longing at these buses but knew that they would not provide an answer to the question- "What do you have to do with schooling?"- since these schools are way beyond the meager means of his family.

In the year 2015, six year old Azad decided to take matters into his own hands and so he set



Self portrait by Azad

off, bare feet, in tattered clothes, swinging his arms, to the government school in his village. Through his sheer doggedness and single minded perseverance he managed to gain entry. He was the only child from his Kalbelia community to have taken this bold step.

Once he joined school however, he did not receive the welcome that another new child perhaps would have. The other children shunned him and every now and then he faced the same question " - "What do **you** have to do with schooling? ". For sometime Azad remained aloof. He watched children play but did not join them. He was considered a short term entrant who would soon drop out. At this point in his life, however, there was a new twist in Azad's search. This was his encounter with the OELP teacher. Luckily, for him, this teacher took it upon herself to support him. She was of the firm belief that it was children like Azad who needed programs like OELP most of all.



With this new found support Azad began to participate actively in the class activities. Soon he began to shine. When his teacher was ever asked about the performance of her class she would not hesitate to take Azad's name as one of the bright sparks who was at the top of the class. She was full of praises for him. Were you to look at the class attendance Azad's name was amongst the children who attended regularly without a miss. Slowly, Azad had begun to bond with his classmates. This is perhaps a major reason that this child, who had earlier been shunned by his peers in school, is a proficient reader and writer, and a thinking learner, today.



Gradually, as Azad gained strong foundations in reading, writing and numeracy, he became a confident and proficient learner despite the fact that he had absolutely no support at home. Today Azad is in Grade 5 and one of the high achievers in his class. His performance has been the driving force for ten more Kalbelia children not only gaining admission but also participating in school.

Azad's story represents the story of thousands of vulnerable children like him for whom entry into school is just the beginning of a real struggle. It is the struggle of young children who grow up at the lower rungs of the social ladder. Children who do not have support for school based learning at home. This is a struggle for crossing the bridge from exclusion to inclusion. It needs support and focused attention. It requires a learning environment in which each child feels safe and accepted.