

The room was a bit dark. More than thirty young women were sitting together. Space was in short supply. It is not easy to find a room to rent in a village that can serve as a classroom for thirty students. So, they had to make do with what was available. We were in a village in Jhadol block of Udaipur district in Rajasthan. What was lacking in physical space was made up by the shining eyes and eager faces in the room. Their instructor, also a young woman just slightly older than her students, was hard at work with the group. Together they were studying for the upcoming tenth standard board exam that was still a few months away.² Though they all looked young, none of them were school-girls, at least not officially. For one reason or another, each one of them had to leave school in the last few years. They did not like the word "dropout"; neither did they want to say "failed". Perhaps "left behind" would be a better description. Their friends had gone ahead to higher classes in school but for reasons beyond their control, these girls had to stop their formal education. Now they were preparing to take the exam that would certify that they had completed Std X.

At first, the young women were shy; their voices soft as they answered my questions. On this cold winter day, their tan salwar kameez blended with the brown walls of the room. The "uniforms" were made at the request of the young women. Wearing uniforms, they felt, made their coming to "school" more credible. For all of them, this "second chance" to return to the mainstream was very important. They needed to establish that they were capable of being like everyone else.

A little later, two "graduates" came to visit the class. Both had gone through the same "Second Chance" program two years ago. Even before they spoke you could feel their confidence. As soon as she started speaking, we could tell that Chanda, the tall girl had a sunny personality. She told us her story with humour. Just a few months before she was to take her tenth board exam her grandfather died. The grandfather was from a distant village. Her parents had to go to the grandfather's village to take care of matters. All of that took several months to get sorted out. In the meanwhile, someone had to manage affairs back at home - the farm, the livestock and the rest of the younger brothers and sisters. The exam came and went. Chanda could not take it. She simply did not have the time; she had not been able to go to school since all this happened and at the time it was very important to help the family get through the crisis.

So, when Chanda found that there was a way to re-enter the education system, she took it. She too had a similar group of "second chance" friends - aspirants from her village and nearby villages. Her instructors like the one we saw in class today also worked hard with them. Almost everyone got through. Today Chanda was in class twelve in the local high school. Her stories about life in high school were full of amusing twists and turns. Apparently, after the hard work for the tenth exams, Chanda was surprised at the lack of discipline and structure in high school. Student attendance was low and often faculty left early. She said that they routinely went to their teachers and said, "Sir aaj please hamey kuch padha deejee" (Sir please teach us something today). Not discouraged by lack of interest on the part of the teachers, Chanda declared, "I teach my friends what I know." Everyone in the room listened intently, inspired by what Chanda was saying. As she was speaking, someone opened one of the windows. The warm winter sun beamed straight into the room.

¹ Chief Executive Officer, Pratham Education Foundation.

² This group is part of Pratham's Second Chance program which helps young women and girls who have had to leave school prepare and take the 10th standard board exam.

Past the bare hills, and through the green fields, we went further down the valley to another big village. Here we found another group of "second chance" girls on the first floor in a new building. The building had been constructed as a commercial space; some sections of it still had to be rented out. On the first floor, there was a row of rooms opening out on to a wide verandah. Our class was in one of these rooms. The instructor, Kiran, was teaching algebra. Although slightly built and slim, her voice was strong and her grip on math and on her group of students seemed stronger still. She moved between the groups of students in the cramped space, talking about the equations on the blackboard and looking at what students had written in their notebooks. Soon it was lunchtime. After several hours of concentration and diligent work, the class spilled into the verandah for their break, talking, laughing and breathing in the fresh air.

From the verandah you could look over the entire village and surrounding fields. Kiran came and stood next to me. "There is my house" she pointed in the distance. She was still in the process of completing her bachelor's degree. She had come to this village after getting married a year and a half ago. "Earlier our group used to meet right in front of my house. But that was difficult for me. Anytime there were guests at home, someone came to call me to make tea or other things. It disturbed my teaching. Now we have moved here and that is good. I pack my bag and come here in the morning and only go back home in the late afternoon once classes are done." She smiled, quietly proud of having established her own professional identity.

Life is often not smooth or linear; there are bumps and obstacles, hurdles and discontinuities. It is a common human desire to want to do better. Most people, like the girls in Jhadol, have aspirations and dreams. They want to be like others. Given even a small opportunity, they will grab it and make the most of what they can.

Of course, things are changing; in villages like these, across Rajasthan and in many communities around India. Sometimes the change is obvious and visible and sometimes less so. Enrollment levels have gone up across the country. Ten years ago, in rural Rajasthan, almost 30% of fourteen-year-old girls were out of school. Today that number has almost halved.³ In a district like Udaipur, the number of girls who reach Std VIII has almost doubled from about 12,000 in 2005-2006 to over 20,000 in 2013-14.⁴ Just like years of schooling, literacy rates have been rising too. From one census to another we see big jumps in the numbers. In Udaipur for example, according to the 2001 census, only 53.7% eighteen-year-old females were counted as "literate"; by 2011 this number had climbed to over 65%. The mean age of marriage has also been inching up; for young women in rural Rajasthan it was 19.5 years in 2010 and it is up to about 21.3 in 2015.⁵

The next day, we were in a village not far from the main Udaipur-Ahmedabad highway. As we asked for directions people asked us whether we were there to see the birds. The village had a huge lake where many migratory birds came in winter. By the side of the lake was a temple and a large paved area with benches. Sitting on one of these benches, I chatted with Bhawana and Manju, two college students who were surveying youth in the village.⁶ They had been trained in how to conduct the survey and now as one of the sixty sampled villages in the district, these young ladies were carrying out their assignment in this village.

³ These numbers are based on ASER reports from 2006 to 2016.

⁴ DISE data 2005-2006 and 2013-2014.

⁵ These numbers are based on the Sample Registration System, Census of India.

⁶ The two young women were participating in the ASER 2017 survey in Udaipur district. They were studying in a well-known teacher training college in Udaipur.

Apart from the bird migration, the village had another interesting characteristic - many men from this village, mainly Brahmins, worked as cooks in cities not only all over India, but also in London and New York. The girls gave us this information. They had been in the village for the past two days, talking and learning about the young people and their families. "Do you know", one of them said, "one of the men from this village is a cook in the Ambani's house in Mumbai?"

I was impressed with these two, their engagement, interest and the zest with which they were absorbing and analysing what they were learning. We chatted as we walked down a dusty lane to an outlying hamlet. One of them had borrowed a scooter from her husband. "Having a vehicle is handy" she explained. Bhawana and Manju were training to be school teachers. Their college made them work hard, they had to attend all classes and do assignments. "Our college is not like other teacher training places" they claimed. "In other institutions you can simply pay money and get your degree. But in our college, we really have to work hard".



We followed the survey rule - every fifth household had to be sampled and any young person in the age group 14 to 18 had to be surveyed. Each sampled youth was asked a series of questions about what they did, what they wanted to do and so on. But the most interesting part was that there were also tasks that had to be done with the surveyed young people. Tasks ranged from counting money, making purchase decisions, reading ORS packet instructions, calculating interest rates - the kinds of things that we do in our daily lives.

Our hamlet was a bit outside the village. Many people kept their livestock here but lived in the village itself. There were fences or walls around each piece of land and sometimes a big gate as well. Quite fearlessly, the girls would go in and see if there was anyone living there. They had learned a lot in the last two days, they told me. Wandering the rural areas and speaking to people at length gave you a clear perspective on things. They had never done anything like this before. But the exercise had also got them worried. "So many of the young boys and girls we are speaking to are in school or college, but they can't do the simple tasks we ask them". As an example, they gestured at the house we had just left; the seventeen-year-old there had really struggled with calculating a simple percentage problem. In two or three days, Bhawana and Manju had been able to collect information, make observations and analyse the situation with young people in the village. Perhaps left to their own devices, these two energetic and enterprising young ladies would sort out the problems in the village too.

Underneath the macro trends, the figures and numbers that we read about in newspapers and research reports, are people. It is their search for the next step, their ability to convert opportunities into outcomes, their hopes and aspirations that fuels the path forward. It is people who can make the trends change and patterns take on a different direction. The "Second Chance" girls will change their own destiny. Their years of schooling may not have been continuous but in the next enumeration in their village, they will all hopefully be marked as "Std X passed".

Whether at school level or college, we have many institutions. But often institutions don't deliver what they are supposed to do. It takes individuals, their dreams and desires to confront and then bridge the gaps, thereby creating new opportunities for moving ahead. A lot of progress has been made but a lot more needs to happen. Kiran is already teaching; Bhawana and Manju will be finding their feet soon in their world of work. I leave Udaipur with a strong conviction that we need to ensure that more Kirans, Bhawanas and Manjus come forward and that they have more opportunities to change their own lives and the lives of those around them.