

## My First Class

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I have been working in the Azim Premji School, Dineshpur (Uttarakhand) from February 6, 2012. Our school came into operation with effect from April 10, 2012. A month before that, we went around Dineshpur, visiting homes and gathering information from parents about the children – children going to school, those who left studies midway, in what circumstances going to school stopped, and whether or not they now wished to resume and complete their studies. Thereafter, we told them about the Azim Premji School, its functioning and management, what facilities children would be provided there, and also that this school has been set up with just one purpose : Education for all – no one should be deprived of this boon.

An understanding of the geographical location and milieu of Dineshpur revealed that most of the inhabitants had migrated to this place from Bangladesh, and so the language of most of the inhabitants was Bengali – and Punjabi. In the initial days, we tried to get an idea of the social, economic and family circumstances of the children as well as their ways of living. We tried to establish a relationship with them through dialogue and games. Through the medium of games we could plan to teach them in accordance with their capabilities.

This was a new experience for me.. The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 speaks of giving space to the local language in the class. We saw ourselves standing at a distance from this. It was now the time either to keep this distance or meet the challenges face-to-face and go beyond them. We accepted this challenge and gave the children an opportunity to express themselves in their own language., Bengali. Soon enough, we were able to understand their language a bit and the children started to enjoy speaking in Hindi. It seemed that things were going fine and we continued to make efforts at understanding each other.

“This unit is about the reality of many of those classes where the mother tongue of the students and the language of the school is not the same. Such situations are often considered to be challenging. The purpose of this unit is to highlight the awareness and positive understanding about multi-lingualism which underlines the fact that through the medium of multi-lingualism, language can be taught to all students together.” N.C.F.2005



Class1 had thirty students. Rani Mandal (not her real name) was one of them but her behaviour was different from that of others – or we may say that she was caught up in her own little world. Hitting one of the other children was a normal thing for her, sometimes even going to the extent of biting. No child would sit near her, or talk to her and she too would not play with anyone. Whatever one said to her, she would respond by staring back, sometimes even trying to hit out with her feet and arms. This would happen even if we tried to engage her in normal conversation. I was lucky enough to have escaped the beating, though she seemed to have decided to bite me at times. Anyone who saw her behaviour would say that she was a misfit our society.

Back then, we were twelve teachers in all, along with Aruna V. Jyothi, a colleague-cum-guide who gave us a direction in terms of meeting the challenges we faced in the process of teaching. She had been active in school education over the last twenty one years. We would share thoughts on all that was necessary for a school to run smoothly and would then work together on whatever rule was framed. There were differences of opinion too but in a living situation, that is a good thing to have.

All the children were upset at and troubled by Rani Mandal’s uncomfortable behaviour. Dealing with her was a challenge for me. I discussed this with Aruna who accepted that it was a challenge, but said that I had to decide on my own how to deal

with her. She cautioned me on just one thing – that I should never speak to Rani in a loud voice. This, she said, is likely to bring about a change in her.

I conveyed to all the students that none of them should talk to Rani until and unless she herself wished to talk. No one should trouble her. The children would play, be engrossed in stories and poetry and Rani Mandal would look at them from afar, never speaking to anyone. This continued for a few days. One day the children were playing and some were reciting poems. Looking at how they enacted the poems, Rani Mandal began laughing. I felt happy looking at her laugh. I now started organising some activity or the other which she would feel happy to look at.

One day she herself came and stood in a circle with us, clapping with all children. I then started talking to her a bit and she too began responding with a nod or a shake of the head. I would now call her to myself or go to her and work, sitting by her. In a few days she herself started coming to me. Her behaviour with the children also began to change now. As time passed, she also began playing with the children.

One day I happened to go to her home. I came to know that she had a brother. Their parents would go out for work even before the children woke up. Her brother was just one and a half years old. She cleaned the house, washed the utensils and took care of her brother the whole day. When she came to school, the little brother had to be left at the mercy of the neighbours. Her mother would scold

and beat her even for petty issues. Her parents never came to the school for the parent-teacher meet.

I once came across the parents in the market and talked to them about Rani Mandal. They thanked me and said that she now relates stories and poems to her younger brother and keeps busy doing some painting. I felt happy and requested them to come to the parents' meetings, saying that children will feel happy to be praised before them, and feel encouraged to make better efforts.

When Rani Mandal was in Class 3, there was a Painting Competition conducted by the magazine *Chakmak*, and she won a prize. She came to me and said, 'See madam, what I've got as a prize. You are my first teacher. That's why I have come to show this to you'. It gave me a strange sense of joy that filled my eyes to the brim – it was a moment I can't express in words.

How time flies one does not even realise. She is now in Class-6 and comes to the school in salwar-kameez, hair tied in two braids. When I am with my students in Class 1, Rani Mandal comes to me and helps me take care of the children in the class.

In these five years I have learnt a lot. The most important has been the lesson to keep patience. Aruna ji comes to the school every year and we discuss issues with her. She says, there are some things to which there are no answers. Time guides us, our sense and sensibility helps us understand and make the required effort.

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