

Shantha K

The theme - *Every Child Can Learn* - was decided in December 2019 and participating in that discussion, the child who came into my mind was one who I watch every morning. It occurred to me that I had something to contribute to this issue.

The community I live in is an upcoming layout with a lot of houses under construction. Every morning, while working in my kitchen I observe this family, which is part of the construction workers' group, living in a small temporary shed and busy in their daily chores. Their busy life begins at six in the morning and ends by nine at night. The motto *Early to bed, Early to rise* is followed here. The head of the family is a lady who works as a labourer at the construction site and is paid daily wages. She has three children, two boys and a girl, named Rekha. Her brother, who is a watchman at the construction site, lives next door with his family. He too has three girls, the eldest of them, goes to school with Rekha and both of them are in class I.

I am fascinated with the routine of this youngest child of a single mother, Rekha. She wakes up around six in the morning, bathes, wears her uniform, helps her mother in washing vessels and clothes, puts them out to dry and then has her breakfast and waits for her friends to join her from other sheds from within the layout to go to school. Five children join her, and they walk to school together. Food is provided at the school (midday meal) so there is no worry for afternoon lunch, and she returns by four in the evening with the same energy. All the bathing, washing, cooking happens in an open space visible from my kitchen window.

I spoke to this girl over the weekend to understand her learning habits, how she is coping with her schoolwork, who guides her with homework and so on. Here are some points, I gathered.

Rekha is about 8-years-old and studies in class I of the Government School at Marsur, Anekal. Teaching is bilingual, both Kannada and English are used in class. Her subjects are Kannada, English, EVS and maths. Her favourite subjects are EVS and maths. When asked what lesson she is currently studying

in EVS, her answer was 'What are living beings?'

We assume that boys are good at maths and girls in social studies and languages. Rekha belies this stereotype; she finds maths very easy, as against some of the boys in her class who find it tough. She takes the help of her older brother in her homework, but since most of the time he too is overloaded with homework, she has found a viable alternative -- to rush to school in the morning and copy from her friend's notebook. Homework is given every day and she is not able to complete it because of all her home chores. So, she is compelled to copy from her friend to avoid punishment in class. How correct her friend's solutions are, the teacher only knows!

Some important questions

Children of these migrant labourers who move periodically, from place to place, busy with household work both morning and evening, attending school in between all this, makes me think: how and when do they make the time to *learn* to do their homework? In this era of digital India, when everything is available on the internet, children from well-to-do families hardly need any support from their parents in their studies. But where will the already deprived children go for solutions, satisfy their hunger for knowledge? All the apps available on the smartphone need internet connectivity, but who will pay for the phone and internet?

Teachers in schools where no support can be provided by the family for studies and follow-up work such as homework need to develop the sensitivity of providing ample support during class time, encourage more classwork and remove the concept of homework, instead of laying so much emphasis on it.

The interesting fact is, despite all these obstacles, children like Rekha go to school, learn and have ambitions of going to work like me. She said she would like to work in an office and not like her mother, carrying bricks. This is as much her mother's desire as hers, because her mother always says, 'I

want all three of my children to get an education and go to work in *office*.'

Rekha goes to school every day with the same enthusiasm and ambition to study. What we need to make sure is that teachers and the community

around create an atmosphere where children like her have the opportunity to learn and acquire knowledge and livelihood in the long run. Then, we can assert that every child *wants* to learn and, given an opportunity, every child *can* learn.



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A big part of learning to teach well is beginning to recognise which symbols the students understand and then, to choose and use the most effective ones out of those. When the students begin to respond with interest in my class (or I begin to see symbols that I think represent interest), that shapes my own self. I begin to see myself as a competent and proud teacher. We are always interacting through symbols and the study of this process throws important insights into teaching and learning.

Amman Madan, Rebuilding Self and Identity in Adivasi Schooling, p 3.