

Priti David

When summer temperatures are rising in Odisha and the grass is sparse in the grazing grounds, buffalo herders have to look far and wide to feed their animals. To talk about rural India in a city primary school, we began by showing photos of a herd of buffaloes swimming across the river to greener pastures; how the herdsman take great care with their animals, even carrying the small ones themselves. As expected, the story of buffalo migration and a calf calling for its mother in deep waters invariably strikes a chord with young children who instantly identify with the calf. We use this story (*Swimming to migrate in Odisha*) to draw them in to how dairy farmers in India care for their animals whose milk could be that which they drank that morning. The learning goes beyond that.

### **PARI as a learning tool**

Did you know about cattle shelters during the summer where all the farmers take their animals when food and fodder become harder to get? Or about the cattle herder in Yavatmal, Maharashtra, who has devised a body armour to shield himself from the tigers who roam in the forests where he takes the animals for grazing? These stories make for a powerful lesson on kindness towards animals among other learning outcomes. They widen children's imaginations and give them scope to think creatively. It also allows them to walk in the shoes of others, to closely inspect, comprehend and empathise.

A primary school teacher can use the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) to download stories, photos and films available in twelve Indian languages. This online journal is free for use, easy to access and covers rural issues, such as agriculture, farming, migration, communities, crafts, Adivasis and more. These stories inform, sensitise and teach students (from primary to post graduate level) about the many issues of our times. We feel that there is not enough about rural India, which forms a very large part of our country, in our textbooks. Students do not know enough about the many lives and livelihoods that exist in rural India – their homes, their jobs, the forests they rely upon, the

crops they grow, the crafts they create, their songs and ancient legends and more.

Using real stories from deep within rural India is a chance to hear and see a world connected to us in multiple ways. As educators, what do we want our children to value? Can we provide them the tools to build respect and empathy? It is important to nurture humaneness even among the youngest students. Lesson plans and teaching modules generally focus on academic learning, while in fact, emotional and cultural growth will play a big role in determining the essence of the citizen. So the story of herdsman who treat their animals as their own children transforms milk from being a commodity sold in uniform packets, to the life and livelihood of a person, and we understand a little better what it takes to bring that milk to the table.

### **Using PARI resources**

There is no one subject that teaches students empathy and compassion. Moral Science or Value Education classes repeat age-old stories with superimposed lessons and children are expected to memorise cliches like 'a friend in need is a friend indeed'. Teaching about little-known communities and occupations as a way of growing students' understanding of the large country that we live in and the complex interlinkages in our economic and sociological fabric. Also, learning about others is essential to making children become more empathetic.

We encourage schools to design projects which encourage experiential learning; going out and learning first-hand from the everyday lives of others who we normally do not engage with.

### *Project on biodiversity*

Most children recognise honey and have enjoyed its flavour and sweetness. They have also seen bees and been told to keep away. Using PARI's stories with photos and videos, a teacher can deepen their understanding of the process of honey extraction as well as the importance of insects like bees in maintaining biodiversity. Along with this, children will begin to recognise and respect the work of the

traditional honey gatherers and the unique skills required to do this job.

In our project on the story of honey, the honey gatherers of Sundarbans tell their story of searching for honey while dodging tigers, crocodiles and even dacoits. They explain how they smoke the bees out, the protection, or the lack of it, for the hunters and how honey is transported. This can be followed up with the photo story, *Chasing Bees from Sundarbans to Chhattisgarh*, in which we see the process of extraction - a skill which gets them invited to other states to extract honey or, *The Honey Hunters of the Hills*, which describes the unique technique of the Toda Adivasis of the Nilgiris of taking out honey from the hives in tree caves or, *Battle of the Bugs: On Wings of Climate Change*, a short video that explains the importance of bees in pollination and the health of our forests.

In the end, working through the above pieces on honey and bees, we would have covered a little zoology, botany and biology (insects, trees, pollination, nectar and fructose), geography (delta, forests and hills), understood biodiversity and the interdependence of the species, not to mention expanded vocabulary – new words and concepts like *safeguard and extraction*. Additionally, and most critically, honey now has a history, a process and bees have a critical place in our lives. We also learn about the lives of distinct communities and how they are linked to the insect kingdom.

The teacher can now do a small in-school project to create awareness around insects. A group of students can be assigned a tree or shrub and given an hour to note down or draw the insect life that exists in and around it. Back in the classroom, the teacher can explain how these creatures are interlinked with each other, the health of the plant and link it further to the health of the planet.

#### *Project on gender*

One of the most fulfilling sessions we have is with young students on women farmers and its perfect suitability for teaching gender equality without having to explicitly state the term.

It starts with the story of Chandra, a farmer and single parent in Tamil Nadu who often harvests her flowers by fading moonlight, in time to reach the early morning markets. She does so many jobs around the farm and house and the reader finds out why the story is titled *Small Farmer, Big Heart, Miracle Bike!* This is followed by the story, *Footprints in the Sands of a Mine*, which creates a powerful

image of a group of women farmers in the Banda district of Uttar Pradesh. Students understand how important a flowing river (versus a dammed river) is to women who do most of the farming. Finally, they meet Kamala Pujhari of Patraput, Odissa, a saviour of indigenous seeds, who won the Padma Shri for her work in helping to maintain biodiversity of the region.

As a home project, students are asked to note down all the jobs their mothers/ grandmothers do from morning to night, including instructions to eat, bathe etc! It elicited much laughter in the class, but the significance of these women's work was not lost on them when they noted down the jobs and the time taken for each, for example, filling water for use at home. With the stories as a backdrop, they were able to see the contribution of women and the critical role they play in growing our food and maintaining the eco system.

#### *Project on migration*

We begin by explaining the term migration and showing children photos from PARI stories on migration of different kinds – seasonal, circular, permanent and so on. Then, we ask them to speak with those around them who are migrants, cooks, drivers, guards, etc. Initially students feel it would be awkward to start a conversation, but we insist they give it a try by asking the five following questions:

1. Which village, district and state have they come from?
2. How had they travelled?
3. Have they attended school?
4. Why had they migrated?
5. What did they miss the most?

When they return a week later with first-hand accounts of people around them, who are, as expected, migrants, most students had not only learnt more about migrants, they were also ready to reject the stereotypical images of migrants as homeless, lazy and illiterate.

Speaking to the people otherwise 'invisible' to them forces them to engage and understand why people have to leave their homes and loved ones, what are the different places in India that people migrate from, how often do they go back, how do they feel on having to drop out of school, what it meant

to start working at a young age, the reasons they had left and so on. Each person that the children were used to referring to by their job-specific titles, *guard*, *dhobi* or the generic terms *didi* and *bhaiya*, come to have an identity. Children also learn to understand and empathise with issues, such as debt, child labour, hunger and the loneliness and heartache of years spent away from home and family, of not being able to see their children grow up or care for their parents in their old age.

Some comments by children:

- I learnt what the word 'drought' means.
- You know the driver's life was just like mine until his father died and he had to leave school and start working.
- Children our age are working on fields and construction sites instead of going to school.
- Farmers are growing food for us to eat even though sometimes they don't get food.

#### *Project on farming and food*

A project on agriculture, farming and food is about learning how food comes to their plate and the processes which lead to the sugar in their chocolate! We show children some stories on farming – rice and sugar cultivation, watermelons and tomatoes.

We then ask them to accompany an adult to the vegetable market and speak to a vegetable vendor and ask the following questions:

1. Where do you come from?
2. Do you grow these vegetables yourself? Or from where do you buy them?
3. How do you transport the vegetables and what happens to the vegetables that are not sold?

Sometimes, children have to wait while the vendor finishes serving his or her customers. This allows the children to watch them at work.

Some comments by children:

- I've never held a weighing scale before; it's quite heavy!
- She [the vendor] said she travels two hours in a bus to come here and sell.

In summary, the PARI pedagogy uses stories in various formats – text, photo and film - on the everyday lives of people to inform and sensitise children. It helps them gain an understanding of the larger picture of citizenship. Learning about the diversity of languages, livelihoods, communities and cultures helps children reject stereotypes and become tolerant of the differences in their fellow citizens.



**Priti David** reports for the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) and writes on education, health, women, crafts and livelihoods. As Editor of PARI Education, she works with schools and colleges to bring rural issues into the classrooms and curriculum. She is an Economics Honours graduate with a B Ed degree. She has worked with The Economic Times and CNBC, ABNI (TV) and reported for India Business Report (BBC World). She has been the Editor of 'Stone Crafts of India' a publication of Crafts Council of India. Priti has taught at the Rishi Valley School, Andhra Pradesh and St. Joseph's Boys' High School, Bengaluru. She is a guest faculty in development journalism in universities and the author of '*Coming Home*' (Karadi Tales). She may be contacted at [priti@ruralindiaonline.org](mailto:priti@ruralindiaonline.org)