



# Book excerpt: ordinary people, extraordinary teachers – the heroes of real India

IN HIS BOOK 'ORDINARY PEOPLE, EXTRAORDINARY TEACHERS', **S GIRIDHAR** DESCRIBES HOW TEACHERS IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS ARE DETERMINED TO WORK BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY BASED ON A STRONG BELIEF THAT 'EVERY CHILD CAN LEARN'.

Rural government schools have the odds stacked against them. The most socio-economically disadvantaged children go to these schools. Around 50 per cent of these children are first generation learners whose parents are daily-wage earners. It is in these circumstances that government school head teachers have to demonstrate that their schools are good; that the children are well cared for; and, are learning well. They have to not only revitalise and sustain the relationship with the community but also manage a bundle of diverse issues and constantly look out for resources. Viewed in this context, these head teachers perform a role akin to that of a CEO of an institution.

During my visits, I discovered that the head teachers considered community relations and winning back enrolment from private schools as one of their main responsibilities. They consider this so crucial that they do not delegate this to their colleagues and personally lead all communications and actions involving the community. The dynamic head teachers have a clear three-pronged communication strategy.

One, articulate a clear vision of the school and its goals; two, visit and meet parents and community members individually and in groups to explain this commitment; and three, conduct visible time-bound actions that demonstrate their commitment to the safety and learning of children. Invariably, the community begins to respond positively to such efforts. Once this initial boost is received, the head teacher consolidates and ensures other actions for continuous and sustained improvement in every aspect of the school's functioning. All along, transparent communication with the community is maintained, expenditure statements are shared and visible improvements are showcased to garner their confidence and trust.

While parents may be barely literate, they have a basic desire to educate their children and a keen perception of whether the school is doing its work well or not. An assurance that it is indeed doing well leads to a significant improvement in attendance. Despite pressures of sibling care, migration of families for livelihood, and seasonal help to be extended on farms and during festivals that lead to absenteeism, committed head teachers have created a culture of regular attendance. The head teacher and other teachers often have mobile phone numbers of every parent and call them up if a child is absent from school. This not only works as a gentle reminder to parents to send their children regularly but also substantiates the fact that the school is an ally, a partner equally invested in their children's development.

Some months ago, at a seminar in a university, when I was asked to list the key elements of such committed leadership, I placed the following before them:

■ Many schools may have well-articulated goals, but in these schools (that also feature in this section), the goals are not merely expressed on notice boards or in conversations but are firmly ingrained in the detailed plans and actions of every single day. As a result of this commitment to make this vision a reality, one can see a perceptible impact on the attitude and work of teachers.

■ Every head teacher is aware of the importance of good relations with the community but the distinguishing feature of effective leaders is their ability to communicate and present their efforts and children's learning and development visibly. So, events such as *Bal Mela*, Annual Day and Independence Day are celebrated in a manner that reflects the school's commitment to all-round development of children and showcases their learning and talent. These head teachers have a clear metric to assess the impact of such a rapport—an increase in enrolment by winning back students from private schools.

■ With regard to planning and preparation, I noticed that they have a rhythm for specific, period and long-term actions. One can see this in the manner in which they identify priorities, implement actions, and then set new priorities as a natural progression towards the attainment of their goals.

■ From hands-on daily management of the school to keeping a keen eye on critical school processes such as the morning assembly, maintenance and use of the library, meticulous preparation and effective use of children's learning portfolios and regular reviews with teachers, these head teachers have their tasks cut out. But going beyond regular duties and demonstrating extraordinary drive and leadership, they assume complete ownership of their schools through how they care for the infrastructure, ensure safety and hygiene; attempt to mobilise funds from the community, gram

panchayat, block office and also contribute from their own pockets; focus on children's learning; and put in extra efforts for identified children. In larger schools, conscious of the criticality of their teachers, the head teachers also provide supervision and encourage teachers to attend development programmes for continuous improvement.

'Going the extra mile' might have become an oft-used cliché but regains its salience when used for these head teachers whose resilience and courage help them to either ignore constraints or overcome them with bold, ingenious solutions. **T**

*(Excerpted with permission)*

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*To get a copy of the book, visit: <https://www.amazon.in/Ordinary-People-Extraordinary-Teachers-Heroes/dp/9388754859>.*

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