

Expanding the Approach to Education in Rajasthan

“It’s important to learn through experience,” says ace student Urmila Suthar. The 20-year-old, who lives in the village of Ajoliya ka Khera in Chittorgarh district, Rajasthan, explains, “If I read about the fort in Chittor, I may not understand its history or significance properly. However, if I go there and walk around, and listen to the stories the guide tells me, I will not only know the history better, but also enjoy the learning process.”

Urmila – who is currently pursuing a dual Bachelors degree in Science and Education – credits Shiksha Sambal for expanding her perspective on education. Shiksha Sambal (SS) is an education support program – a joint initiative of the Government of Rajasthan, Hindustan Zinc Limited and Vidya Bhawan Society. SS provides academic support in Science, Maths and English to over 14,000 children in 64 Government Secondary and Senior Secondary Schools across five districts of Rajasthan. The program has many components, including regular teaching in government schools by teachers trained by

Shiksha Sambal, Winter and Summer camps for intensive learning, and home visits by field staff.

The 35-40 day long, free Residential Camps in Udaipur are a particularly popular offering. The purpose of these summer camps is to engage intensively with students and provide them with the necessary academic inputs, and the experience of an alternative learning environment. Urmila, who was 15 years old and had just joined Tenth standard when she heard about the summer camp in 2016, confesses that she was tempted by the idea, but also really scared at the prospect of staying away from home on her own. In a context where it is unusual for girls to stay away from the supervision of their guardians for long stretches, many of her school classmates and their parents shared these reservations.

However, Urmila’s mother, 40-year-old Raju, who never got the opportunity to go to school herself, encouraged her to go. “I didn’t care about what people would think or say...I want my daughter to study and become independent. This was an opportunity for her to learn, see the world and grow,” says Raju. Thus, in 2016, Urmila became the only girl from her village to attend the summer camp.

A shy girl, Urmila says that the safe learning environment at camp worked wonders for her. Working in small groups of four to five peers helped her overcome her hesitation, and become more comfortable asking questions. Parul Sharma, a Subject Coordinator at Shiksha Sambal, explains that peer learning is an important aspect of the program’s design:

“Studying is an individual task in schools – you may be sitting next to your peers, but you are expected to study on your own. Peer learning at camp pushes the students to articulate and express themselves, and also bond with others from castes, regions and religions different from their own. This builds their perspectives and respect for each other...dealing with different kinds of people is important in any



career.”

This approach – of expanding the students’ vision through exposure to different perspectives and experiences – is a cornerstone of Shiksha Sambal’s approach to education. Urmila recalls the thrill of practical learning:

“I had heard in Science Class that there are viruses in water, but found it hard to believe because I couldn’t see them. This changed on the day they took us to Fateh Sagar Lake in Udaipur – we gathered a sample of water, brought it back to camp, and placed it under a microscope...I could see the virus!”

Co-curricular activities like dance and painting are also woven into the program – at the end of camp, there is a cultural program where students can showcase their new skills. For a shy girl like Urmila, overcoming her hesitation and dancing in front of an audience at the end-of-camp cultural program was a memorable experience. She came home armed with an increased sense of confidence, having learnt that “there is nothing to fear, and nothing wrong with asking questions.” She began asking questions in class, and this new attitude towards learning helped her score well in her Board Exams.

Her example inspired others – the following

year, three more girls from her village went to the summer camp. Urmila was called back as Captain – a peer mentor for the girls who were coming to camp for the first time – which further built her leadership skills and confidence.

Urmila now works as a Maths teacher with Shiksha Sambal at a Government School close to her village. Though she is supposed to teach only two classes a day, she voluntarily takes extra classes. The teaching experience augments her degree in Bachelors of Education, and brings her a lot of joy. She carries forward the spirit of peer learning by making her students engage in group study, and teaches them that, “we should teach others what we know – knowledge increases when it’s shared.”

Her long-term dream is to become an Officer in the Indian Administrative Services. Though her busy study schedule doesn’t allow her much spare time, she is intent on making time for her other interests – dance and badminton – once she gets a job.

Slowly but surely, Shiksha Sambal’s expansive approach to education is creating a growing ripple in the Government Schools of Rajasthan.



