

A Stitch in Time

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In our village people didn't send their children to school. Children roamed the streets, playing and quarrelling with each other and when they got tired they would come home and fall asleep. Girls would finish household chores and then go to the outskirts of the village to carpet factories or to work in other houses as domestic servants. Education was farthest from their thoughts.

A center of adult literacy was set up in the village. The whole village was displeased. 'What? Now they want to educate our children so they can talk back to us and be disobedient?' the elders of the village said. Some even began efforts to close down this center.

While this was happening, the villagers were approached by the management of the center to send girls between the ages of twelve and fifteen to learn to read and write. The response was not very encouraging to begin with. Only a handful of girls agreed to come. Among them was a girl named Irum. Irum was thirteen years old. She used to work as a domestic servant in several homes. The villagers would spread malicious gossip about her visits to these homes, forcing her parents to make her sit at home and not work. This would make it very difficult for them to make ends meet, so they would send her back to work, since they didn't know how else to make ends meet.

The teacher from the literacy center went to Irum's home and got permission for her to attend the center. Irum had soon mastered reading Urdu and was now working on

her writing skills. She would help other students with their lessons and generally assist the teacher.

After two years the adult literacy center was no more, but Irum's love for learning had grown. After finishing her chores she would go to the teacher's house to study. The teacher had started her own private school where she gave Irum admission. Irum had now cleared her fifth grade exam. Now studying with the teacher, Irum did the next two classes in one year and had soon passed her eighth grade exam.

Her wedding had been planned in a few months' time to the son of a poor farmer from a neighbouring village. Instead of enrolling for matric, Irum joined a vocational training center about which her teacher had told her. Every step of the way, permission had to be sought from Irum's parents. Each time it was Irum's teacher who spoke to the parents and convinced them with patience and rationality.

Irum soon got married. Her husband was a good man. Soon after their wedding, however, he fell ill. The village doctors were unable to cure him. Irum now took up embroidery and sewing for the villagers in order to earn money for her husband's treatment. The skill she had acquired at the vocational training center was now going to save her husband's life. Since she had been to school, she knew how to teach effectively. Soon girls from the village were coming to her to learn embroidery and sewing. With the money she thus earned, Irum was able to pay for her husband's treatment. He soon got better and now both of them work together.

Irum's parents and other villagers now clearly understand the value of education and of acquiring skills. Her younger siblings are all being sent to school now. Other villagers are also following their example. Irum didn't just move ahead herself, she made

her village and her family progress along with her. As a child she had helped her class fellows learn their lessons. Today she is a living lesson on the value of education, for all those who know her.

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