

# *The Kohistani Clay*

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In the year 1999 I was posted as District Education Officer to District Kohistan, which is a rugged mountainous terrain. This is where River Indus and the Karakoram Highway meander into the distance, side by side.

When I took charge, only 5% out of the 365 schools in my district were functional. The rest were like haunted houses. In consultation with my higher officers, I developed a plan of action. I sent out letters to all PTC teachers on their home addresses and called their meetings in each of the three tehsils. In the meetings I also requested the EDO to be present. I tried to ensure the presence of a maximum number of teachers. As the schools were located at a distance from each other, I set off after the morning prayers. I would visit one school and then go back to the office to take care of official matters and then set out to the next school.

After the meetings, these issues stood out the most:

- Low attendance of female students
- High drop-out rate
- Lack of school supplies, books, uniforms etc.

We found out that people in Kohistan don't think too highly of girls' education; even if they send their daughters to school, they don't bother to get them uniforms etc.

To find a solution to the problems we had identified in the first meeting, I called a second meeting. What made me particularly happy was that this time there was greater attendance.

All of us, with the support of parents, specially mothers, came up with these solutions:

- We shouldn't insist on uniforms for now, but only lay stress on personal hygiene.
- Since the girls liked to play with clay toys, clay would be used to make English alphabet, Urdu letters and digits to aid learning.
- For each female student, a plot measuring two square feet was allotted for her to write on using a chalk.
- For the girls to sit, 'cushions' were made by filling plastic sacks with grass and adorning them with Kohistani embroidery.

These decisions were implemented with follow up visits of the school. Girls who were once only working in the fields or taking care of younger siblings now started to attend school. School enrollment and attendance started to increase. I was grateful for the response to my efforts and was humbled by my success.

By the time I was transferred out of Kohistan, according to the official data, 80% of the schools were now functional, compared to the 5% that were functioning when I took over charge.

Even today, after so many years, teachers from that region tell me how Kohistan is not the Kohistan it used to be, how enrollments have gone up. While local traditions are still in tact, girls are attending school too.

I feel I was fortunate enough to have worked with a wonderful team, along side seniors who supported my vision. My vision was simple and solid, like the mountains it was inspired by; my vision was to involve everyone to come up with a plan, and to look

for locally viable solutions. My plan worked because it sprung from the land, because the clay alphabets and digits we made were made from Kohistani clay.

O youth of the nation, let's get some work done,

Come let's develop again this town in ruin

Come, let these shackles on souls now be undone

Come get some work done! Get some work done!

(Majeed)

*The author of the story is a Head Mistress at the Government Girls High School,  
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