

Say Yes to School, Say Yes to Change

Misbah Rani

Thin and sultry with sunken cheeks and braided hair, dull eyes and a dupatta on her head; a worn out *parandee* (three bunches of colourful thread knotted together , worn woven into plaits), peeping from underneath the dupatta. Often barefoot, roaming here and there, sometimes playing in the sand. As soon as anyone would call out to her, she would disappear in the little quarter.

This is my second grade student Shabana Durran Khan. Her father has been the night watchman at our school for the last fifteen years. During daytime he sells socks, caps and other stuff on the roadside. Durran has five daughters and a son. He has to do two jobs to make ends meet.

Our school Sanjan Nagar is an institution distinct for the co-curricular and academic opportunities that it offers to students. There are music classes. There is a veggie-patch, where vegetables are grown to help children understand important concepts in science.

Near one of the two gates of Sanjan Nagar school is a narrow pathway that leads to Durran Khan's quarter. Shabana Durran, eleven years of age, stands clutching the worn out curtain hanging at the entrance of the quarter. She looks on at other children who study or partake of other activities in the school. Sometimes, just to get attention, she picks up lunch from other children's boxes, or comes and quietly and stands behind someone.

I saw all this happening for several months. And then one fine day my feet carried me to Durran's quarter. As I entered I saw the mother cooking something in a pot, while Shabana was kneading the dough to make *chapatti*. Some flour had spilled over the bowl. As they saw me, Shabana's mother and her sisters, a little older than her, all ran to call Baba Durran.

No, I wasn't there to make a complaint of any sort, I told them, to ease their apprehensions. The first part of the conversation with Durran Baba was very predictable. I asked him why his girls weren't sent to school, he said because they were Pathans and sending girls to school was not what Pathans liked to do. Two of his daughters were already married. Shabana's older sisters were betrothed to boys in their village and would be given a send-off reception as soon as Baba Durran had some money in his hand. Anyway, he said, they don't speak much Urdu, so how can they attend a school like this? I said what I had prepared to say: It is a girls' school, Shabana doesn't even have to go anywhere to attend school, and she can study for free. Baba Durran got thinking for a minute: But she is too old to start school now, he said, and our relatives will be angry with us. I asked Shabana if she would want to attend school. The quiet girl looked at her father with such pleading in her eyes that the old man thawed a little. He asked for some time to think. This was a good sign.

Sure enough, Durran Baba came to me one fine morning: 'So when can Shabana start school?'

'From tomorrow, in the evening shift,' I said, and sealed the deal.

At 1.45pm that day as the morning shift came to an end, I went and told the school head mistress about Shabana. The Head Mistress had many concerns: The girl was

too old to sit with the nursery children, she didn't know enough to sit in class 3 or 4, what if she hits the younger children that she studies with? I convinced her that I will teach her my way in my nursery class. Permission was granted.

I quickly procured her school uniform and took it to Shabana's quarter. The next day Shabana stood hesitating outside nursery class, with her father. I took her inside and settled her in. The first few days Shabana kept to herself, looking rather confused the whole time she was in class.

Slowly she started to respond and in no time she had assumed a leadership role in class! In her artwork, Shabana's selection of colours was so fascinating that I couldn't stop looking at her paintings. She got an A grade in the final exams. Both her parents came to collect her result, proud of their daughter's achievement.

Now that Shabana knew her alphabet and phonics, we prepared such worksheets for her for the next class as would enable her to cover the major milestones of class prep and class one in one academic year.

I once again visited the quarter and asked Baba Durran to send Shabana to me an hour before the evening shift began, so I could help her with her reading, vocabulary and spellings etc. Or I would make her write backwards counting in the sand.

At the end of the year Shabana was tested on the first grade syllabus. To our great joy and surprise, Shabana had cleared both classes in one year securing a B grade!

I asked Shabana to come to me during the summer break so she could progress fast enough to be able to sit in a class better suited for her age. Shabana is now 13 years of age. She is brimming with confidence. She wears a clean dupatta and keeps her hair in

a neatly oiled braid. She speaks fluent Urdu and can easily follow instructions given in English.

Shabana's family is pleased with their decision to send her to school. When her older sisters visit, they come to see me. They tell me that they want to send their children to school too. Baba Durran is happy to let Shabana study and leave marriage for later. Shabana's coming to school has brought all this change in her family.

The journey is not yet over. Shabana needs our support so she can one day be a regular student enjoying the company of other girls her own age.

The author is a nursery teacher at the Sanjan Nagar Public Education Trust School.