



Readers' Forum



===When Every Girl Will Go to School===

Beena must be eleven or twelve years old. She is the step-daughter of our maid servant and works as a part-time domestic helper in the flats of our residential complex to add to her mother's earnings. She is a chirpy and bright girl, tidy and fairly well clothed, but as the eldest daughter of a family of three younger step brothers, she bears the brunt of her parents' callousness. My offer to take time out to teach her the basics of the Hindi alphabet and rudimentary writing skills have proven futile because she has neither the time nor the motivation.

There are hundreds of girls like Beena, labouring long hours as meagre earners, contributing pittances to their parents salaries. Individually, we can do nothing more for them than perhaps create some glimmer of awareness, reach out to them as one human being to another rather than remain indifferent to them -or, worse, exploit them. At every *mohalla*, village and district level, we need sensitive and motivated individuals to spread the awareness that sending girls to school is as important as sending boys, because nature has endowed them with the same intelligence and potential to grow into mentally developed citizens. It is only after undertaking this basic counselling campaign that we can begin to send girls currently engaged as petty workers to schools in their area. Finally, there is the challenging task of generating, through NGO's and parental finances, the money that will ensure payment of their fees so that they stay in those schools, rather than become another drop-out statistic.

This two-pronged strategy of raising awareness and ensuring complete schooling is hardly as easy as it seems. But we can no longer merely complain about the platitudes mouthed by our local legislators or state governments regarding low literacy rates among girl

children. All of us - whether literate or educated, whether in schools or in universities, NGO workers, lawyers, and employers of domestic help - need to undertake this daunting task. I dream of a day when girls of Beena's age and all those between the ages of five and twenty are no longer compelled to work in order to survive or to buttress their families earnings, but are instead sent to school - to read and write, to discover and develop their basic mental potential, like other, more privileged children of their age.

Dr. Vijay Prakash Singh, Lucknow

===Disaster Mismanagement in Orissa===

The devastation of the coastal districts of Orissa caused by the recent cyclone was near total. Following that, the sheer unpreparedness of the bureaucracy to handle the situation, and the corrupt practices of our politicians and their greed for the *gaddi*, was as horrific as the cyclone itself. I think you already know enough of all this, widely covered as it was by the media. In comparison, the offer of help that finally came from Chandrababu Naidu from across the border made him a hero in Orissa and put our own leaders in the shadow. People here were talking of *Utkal Desham* and Chandrababu Naidu as their Chief Minister! In fact, just three days after the cyclone, there were strong rumours that the Centre had dismissed the Orissa government, declared an emergency and appointed Sushma Swaraj as the governor. I think this would have been one of the best ways to handle the post-cyclone situation here. Instead, we are still headed by a government that has already lost all sympathy of the people with their total mismanagement of the relief work, the polythene scandal and the like, in the midst of ministerial changes!

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