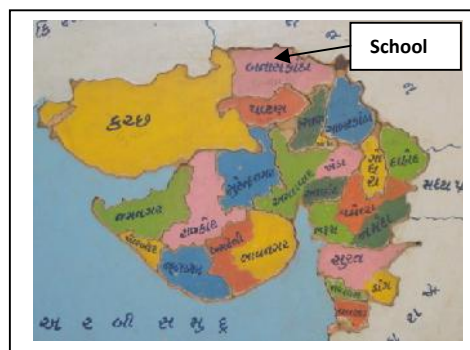


# A DAY WITH GUNOTSAV IN GUJARAT

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Banaskantha district is several hours from Ahmedabad. Beyond Palanpur, not far from the Rajasthan border is Dantiwada block. We cross the Banas river flowing sluggishly through the rocky landscape, go past occasional fields of rapeseed, to reach our school. The habitations here are quite scattered; some children walk several kilometres to get to here. It is morning time - almost time for school to begin.



The big school yard is dotted with old trees. Using branches, children are sweeping the ground clean of leaves. There are classrooms along three sides of the school yard - rooms in a row with a long verandah in front. Children are lining up their chappals neatly along the wall. At one end of the yard is a unit with taps for water. The left over water from this unit drains into the flower beds. Hanging on the tree

trunks in the school yard are small mirrors. They are at the height of the children. Children glance in the mirrors to check on how they are looking. Big mats are being stretched out under the trees. This is a big school - classes all the way from Std 1 to 8 - almost 350 children. Boys and girls are pouring into the school. Everyone is lining up under the trees and on the mats. The smallest children are on the left and the older classes to the right. The school, the teachers and the children are ready for morning assembly.



*Today is the first day of "Gunotsav" - a campaign for quality education across Gujarat. For the last three years, this has become an annual feature in Gujarat's government school calendar. For three consecutive days, every senior officer from every department in the state visits schools. There are IAS officers, officers from other central services, state government senior staff - all in schools assessing facilities, attendance, school activities like assembly, cultural activities as well as school- community linkages. But most importantly, there is a big focus during this visit on understanding children's learning levels. The officer visits each class and asks children to read, to write and do math. The officer and his team spends a whole day in one school from assembly in the morning all the way till the evening when there is a cultural program. Out of 35,000 schools in Gujarat, in the next 2 days about 9,000 or so will get visited. The government's calculation is that in 3 years every school in the state will get a full day visit by a senior officer and his team. This entire exercise is an effort to focus serious attention on school*

*functioning as well as teaching and learning - all of which should lead to improvement of quality of schooling and to better learning outcomes.*

*The officer visiting our school is the CDPO - the person in charge of all anganwadis at the block level. She has four colleagues with her. The team sits in the principal's office will all the formats and the assessment sheets to decide who will do what during the day. There is a lot of paper to be gone through and instructions to be understood. The headmaster helps the officer wherever needed.*

**Standard Five children in this school, sit in a cheerful, bright and airy classroom. There are colourful heavy plastic little desks on the floor- orange and blue. Lots of charts on the wall. Coloured triangular paper flags hang on strings that crisscross the ceiling. It is a big class - almost fifty children. The girls with neatly tied hair and red ribbons sit interspersed with the boys. At this age, boys seem to have hair that cannot be tamed.**

**The officer calls out to different children to come and read. She has many sample paragraphs. The text is at Std 4 level. One by one children come to the front of the class and try to read. The ability to read varies considerably. Some can read fluently; others have to sound out each letter, each matra and each word. A few are silent. Children try hard. And as they try you can see**



**the effort - knitted eyebrows, stiff arms, stretched toes. But regardless of whether they can or not, everyone wants to come to the front of the class and try to read. There is a little girl bouncing up and down at the back of the class. Her red ribbons match with the red bangles she is wearing. She is dying to be picked to read. Her name is Payal. Finally she gets her turn. She jumps to the front of the class and enthusiastically holds the paragraph. But then she freezes, her energy seems to suddenly evaporate. She struggles and struggles trying to navigate words and sentences.**



*It is obvious that many children do not actually speak Gujarati at home. Their mother tongue is common with children across the border in Rajasthan.. It is true that this is their fifth year in school, and it is also true that by now they should be able to fluently read and comprehend complicated text. But unless they can read, they cannot move ahead. I wonder how the teacher handles the difference in language between what children speak at home and the language of textbooks. I wonder how the teacher handles the diversity of reading ability levels in her class. How she decides to whom she will teach what. Of course she has her Std 5 textbook to complete. But then it is also clear that many children in her class are well below Std 4 level. What she does she do to help the children who still cannot read? How does she translate the children's energy and desire into actual capability?*

**We have now moved to arithmetic. The first set of tasks is very straightforward. The officer will say a number aloud and children have to come and write the number on the blackboard in numerals. The officer selects Bhavna who is sitting in the front row. It is Bhavna's birthday today. In the morning**

assembly, children whose birthday it is today were asked to come to the front and each was given a special badge for the day. Bhavna springs up. The officer says " six thousand and fifty eight". Bhavna confidently writes "600058". "Is this correct?" asks the officer. Some children say yes and some say



no and some are silent. A boy comes to the board and writes the number correctly. Now, we move to subtraction problems. "Eight thousand fifteen minus three thousand one hundred and sixty". Again a child writes "800015 ....". For some this is easy but for quite a few others, place value is a problem and doing the operation is difficult.

*In many ways, the situation in the maths class is similar to that in reading - some children are stuck at the basics while others have moved on. Enabling children to understand place value is not hard but if they do not learn it at the right time they get left behind. The curriculum and textbooks move ahead rapidly and build on what they think the children have already learned. Others get left behind, abandoned at the crucial key point when foundation for mathematics need to be meaningfully built. Such children continue in school, move physically with their classmates from grade to grade but make little or no progress year on year.*

The gong rings loudly in the school yard. It is time for the midday meal. Four women have been working hard all morning to get lunch ready on time. They are tall, smiling and work effortlessly. They seem to enjoy being part of the school. One of them has a small baby in a cloth cradle sleeping in the sun outside. Children swarm onto the verandah with plates in hand. There is commotion and fun as everyone tries to save space next to them for their friends and siblings. Very soon, the chaos subsides into order. Weaving their way down the verandah, the women in the colourful lahngas and odhnis begin to serve the children. Today the lunch is "daal dhokli". Piping hot and very delicious. Everyone enjoys the meal heartily.

The lunch break is still on but the children of Std 8 want to chat with us. We decide to go into their classroom and play a game. We agree that we should play an English game. Gujarat starts English in



schools much later than other states. Children's ability to speak sentences or write is not high. Instead of trying to read or write sentences, we decide to play a mind mapping game with vocabulary in both languages. In the centre of the blackboard, the word "mobile" is written in English and in Gujarati. Now children have to think of associated words and come and write them on the blackboard. At first children are not sure how to think. They are not sure if the word "mobile" is Gujarati or English. One girl says "Mobile is the word that is used for this thing. And sometimes we call it phone

also." "What about words that come to your mind when you hear mobile?" We ask. You can hear the entire class thinking. Softly a boy says "m-e-m-o-ry". This word unleashes the potential in the class. Children are falling over each other with words that they want to write. Words begin to appear on the blackboard - "cover", "phone", "memory", "sim", "display", "battery", "camera".. the list goes on

**and on. Children may not know much grammar or syntax but they are able to pluck English words and meanings out of their environment and apply them in class.**

*We leave behind us the happy sounds of an active school. Back on the dusty road we think about the school, what we saw and felt. It is clear that teachers prepare for Gunotsav - and that in itself is a good thing. The schools look neat and clean, facilities working and in order, classrooms well decorated with materials and charts, school records shipshape and activities like assembly running well. These are all necessary elements of a well functioning school. The experience of spending a whole day in a school, year after year, for so many many government officers also can only have beneficial effects. At an individual level, it reminds every one of their school life. At the macro level, it brings the school and its core activities to the forefront of the state's attention.*

*What is the impact of Gunotsav? How does the impact translate into improvement? How is the evidence and the experience used each year to build from the previous year? There is no doubt that school facilities and school functioning must be improving each year. But are schools improving in their core activities of teaching and learning? Are schools better able to help their children - especially those that are behind? Can this year's Gunotsav lead to plans for ensuring that every child learns well. What will be the discussions after Gunotsav is completed this year? What will be discussions at state, district, block, and cluster and school level? Will these lead to activities that will result in every child in Gujarat in Std 5 next year reading fluently, being able to talk and write comprehensively about what they have read and doing any operations up to the number one thousand with confidence?*