

Aman Alee, a shy six-year-old, never once stops sizing me up. Throughout his boisterous mother's conversations, one can see his mind wrapping itself around each word. Anyone who watches Aman for more than ten seconds will notice his curiosity, which is why it's not surprising that his academic performance ranks first in his class. What is surprising about this kindergartener though is the fact that he even attends Hans Raj Samarak Public School, a private institution for his area's financial elite. Aman lives in a Sima Puri slum. His parents do not make more than 3,000 rps/month, equivalent to about \$66 US.

Coming from a family of such a low income, a child such as Aman typically would never be able to attend a private school. However, the government officials responsible for Delhi Education Act of 1973 and the NGO Parivartan think otherwise.

The Delhi Education Act includes a reservation clause that mandates all private institutions matriculate a 20% quota of children from the Economic Weaker Section (EWS), a classification given to those households which make less than 5,000 rps/month. But these 30,000 spots are not getting filled. Very few of the private schools targeted by the act want these children, and continually try to prevent their entrance. With the help of Parivartan, 20 mothers, mostly uneducated, fought the private schools, fought the State's educational officers and fought the courts for the ability to send their children to the schools they deserved. Maybe, someday Aman will understand what his mother had to go through in order that he attend Hans Raj Samarak.

Arvind Kajriwao, head of Parivartan could tell him. An Indian Revenue Officer, Kajriwao has taken a seemingly permanent sabbatical, the last 4 years, due to his overwhelming dismay over the growing disparity amongst economic classes.

"We saw [the reservation clause] as a great opportunity for the poor people to be able to get good education for their children, who otherwise had to depend on Government schools which are in terrible conditions. However, we also knew that since it would mean a loss of revenues for the school authorities and there were also several psychological barriers that they had against admitting poor children, it may not be an easy task for poor to directly get admissions there. We clearly saw a need for Parivartan to facilitate this process for the poor."

Now he commits himself fully to getting EWS children into good schools. His ebullience coupled with a grounding pragmatism conveys a charisma that helped convince the 20 mothers he could get their children the education they are afforded by law. Empowering these women to fight for their rights might have seemed insurmountable at first, especially after the antagonism many of them experienced trying to get through the maze of bureaucracy, bigotry, and apathy.

"I waited in the lobby for two hours, because the principal told me to," says Lakshmi, an EWS mother whose horror story embodies the private schools' reaction. "When he finally came out of his office, he did not even look at me. He just headed out the doors and to his car. He rolled up the window, locked the door, and just drove off. I just stood there and cried. Then he called on Sunday [a few days later] and told me to come the school. After getting there, he wouldn't even see me . . . I don't know why he did that. I just don't understand."

Lakshmi still hurts from that experience. Why the principal told her to come back will remain a mystery, but she does not worry about it too much. Her son is in a different school and can already read English better than his 12-year-old government educated sister.

Turning Lakshmi and other mothers' tragedy to triumph was no easy task. After the schools denied admittance, Kajriwao, along with a team of several other social workers, filed a complaint under the mothers' name against the respective school to both the district's Education Director and to the school itself. If the Education Department had been willing to fight for the children, then the private schools could lose government recognition and/or via the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) have to back pay on all government land subsidies—a move strong enough to bankrupt any institution. After 30 days of no reply, Parivartan employed a powerful weapon. Under the Right to Information Act, the government must respond within 30 days to any requested inquiry. Parivartan wanted to know what happened to their complaint.

Those 30 days, just as the last, passed without word from Delhi's State Education Office. So the social workers rounded up all the women, with fair warning, and staged a "sit in" right in the Director's waiting room. And they waited. They waited almost seven hours before being escorted out by the police. While several officers slapped the women and detained the Parivartan workers, the group eventually left peacefully. Pushpa remembers the skirmish fondly. "I wasn't scared. It was exciting to be able to fight for my rights." Two hours in a holding cell did not deter Kajriwao and the other social workers from reporting these events to the Public Grievance Commission, the only body with the power to reprimand the State's Education Director.

"At the first hearing, the Education Department sent some low level worker who could not give any answers. The Commissioner yelled at the officer, but only mandated another hearing," Kajriwao says, smirking. The same thing happened at the next hearing a month later and the next hearing after that. The same officer came back with more half answers and equivocations. "The commissioner who had worked with the Delhi government before had ties with those people. A lot of ties. But as we started mounting up hearings, the threats started getting heavier." And then around the time of the fourth hearing, the schools called and decided to accept the students.

The women all laugh together now that they have their victory and their children are doing so well. The only response one gets after asking about the new schools is "It's a dream. The education is just a dream."

The schooling is not lost on the children. "He wakes up at six, puts on his clothes and then demands we get out of bed," says Sushma, who enthusiastically relates how proud she is of her five-year-old son, Gourish. "And even if it is the weekend, he still demands to go to school. Sometimes, only after we take him to the school and show him its closed will he stop complaining. He tells me anything the teacher says. Manners are very important. 'Yes, mamma. No, mamma.' He even speaks English in his sleep."

When asked, the teachers also convey a sense of success. "Except for a couple of students [out of the 30], we are very pleased with their performance," proclaims the Head Mistress of Nuten Vidya Munder Public School, while proudly showing off the nursery school classrooms. "They are very eager to learn . . . they never miss class, even if they are sick, they still come." She is the first one to acknowledge that there is no difference

between the reservation students and the tuition paying students. “Two of the [EWS children] are even top of their class.”

But once these children go home, the environment of the neighborhood is a drastic change. To get to many of their houses one might pass heaps of burning trash. Swarms of flies attack any piece of fallen food or feces. Men idly sit, smoking bidis (Indian cigarettes), and swearing loudly. Once entering one of these tiny homes, there is a noticeably different feel from the bustling streets. It is apparent that these women try very hard to maintain a standard of living even in these meager one-room shacks. . Sushma colors her home with florid tapestries while Lakshmi hangs up her children’s artwork for more vibrancy. Moreover, the houses are immaculately kept and the décor challenges the drab environment of the outside.

The Parivartan group continues to work diligently on gaining acceptance for more children at more schools. Parents and social workers struggle daily with the new schools and the more Education Officers. But Kajriwao is never discouraged, because he knows that his success is the children’s success, and together they have proven what can be accomplished.