

Girls Education a Continuing Challenge - An Interview with Ms. Hemlata James

By Rinchin and Maheen

Hemlata James is the principal of the Government middle school in haat pipaliya. She is known for her efforts in making the school one of the best in the area and since she has taken over the number of girls in the school has almost doubled. "In the beginning we had 238 girls. Now people are taking their girls out of private schools and admitting them here. Last year over 138 girls joined our school." She is also known for being the only woman in the town who drives a geared two wheeler (Hero Honda Street).

The school has also seen an increase in infrastructure in terms of new rooms and toilets for the girls. Hemlata James has got a computer center constructed. Her administrative skills and her efforts in mobilizing resources for the school from the government or private are admirable. "Niramaan kaam mein khud khadi reh kar karati hoon. I stand and get the construction done. I think infrastructure is important. We have got this computer room built, along with a hall, a stage and toilets for girls. These things are important. Also if you get things done yourself, they get done quicker and are cheaper."

Why do you think Parents are reluctant to send girls to school?

parents are scared of their daughters safety. They are also scared that girls will run away if they get to educated. Earlier there were incidents where the school girls were being teased by boys at the chowk on their way to and from the school. The teachers from the school along with me went and rounded the boys and brought them to school. The parents of the boys were then called and it was explained to them the problems and the effect that this kind of behaviour had on girls.

"We make sure that the girls are safe. Now we have instituted a system where the girls leave the school in a line and the teachers watch over them and that way we make sure that they reach home safe. Almost all the schools get over at the same time 12:00 noon, and there is a lot of traffic due to school buses and a number of boys at the Chowk." so we decided that they should all go in a straight line, to different areas of the town. I have male teachers standing on bikes at different parts of the town, so that nothing happens to the girls while going back. Eve teasing has stopped because of this.

Girls are not allowed to leave with any one. We cross check who comes to take them. The idea is to make sure that the girls are safe.

She says she is aware of the concerns of the parents when they send their girls to school. "Now we have a proper boundary wall for the school and toilets."

What are the differences that you see in your times and in this times.

One is that there is a difference in the number of girls that are studying. The number of girls studying now is much higher.

Secondly, there are more facilities for girl students and even for the boys. Books, uniforms, midday meals etc., all these are now given.

Now government schools have computers/ where would girls get access to computers. People without enough income cannot afford to take private computer courses. Now that we have computers girls can at least learn here. They know what a computer is and they can open it.

Then, there is a lot of motivation for education and for girls education also. Parents realise that they just have to send the girls to school and the rest is all taken care of by the school. "Earlier parents had a different mansikta. Itna rujhan nahin tha padahi ki taraf. They felt that she has to do only cooking so what is the use of making her study. But now that has changed. Parents are keen to send their girls."

Hemlata has a keen interest in sports and always starts the day with a drill and some exercises. We saw a glimpse of this when we went to her school.

"Our school is doing well in sports and our school represented the state in Guides and Red Cross. We have a

girls' team for kabbadi. Next year we will make sure that our girls can participate at the National level competition. Up till now it was difficult as girls don't get many opportunities. Sometimes even when they are selected they cannot go for national events because there are no women teachers to accompany them so parents are also not willing to send their children. We are planning to start new sports for girls - basket ball, cricket, throw ball and badminton. In Kabbadi we are doing quite well already. You need fewer resources for sports like that. Our rural girls do well in sports like that. We need to encourage this but we will also should introduce new sports. It is important that we get all kinds of schemes and opportunities to expose the girls, once there is a chance for us, we can try to persuade the parents to send girls outside. The exposure will make them more confident. That will also give them space to negotiate with their parents.

why do you think that has happened what makes the parents think different now days.

Parents have begun to realise that educated girls are doing very well. They are getting into different professions, they get employed and they do well and are able to earn quite well. There are many more girls who are working. Earlier women had little choice but to manage house. Now parents are thinking if our daughters study they can get work, they can also be something. They can become teachers, nurses and even doctors or join the police. Now they want their girls to study. That might ensure her future. Earlier parents were scared that if they educated their daughters too much they would run away with someone.

At the government school we are respected and trusted by parents. We have many women teachers who are teaching and people also know that there is a lady Head Mistress (HM) and that makes them trust us more.

This school has more than four hundred girls now. You should see the environment, the atmosphere in the morning its so vibrant and full, with girls all busy in activity.

My work is very hectic. Besides the work and administration of the school I have to supervise fifteen schools. This is a Jan Sikhan school with 16 schools under it and the activities of these also fall under my purview. I have to visit these schools quite often and I go on my bike. Sometimes i take my teachers with me sitting behind me. I don't have to take classes in the school.

Her work is mostly managerial and with all her responsibilities she doesn't have fixed timing to be able to teach as well. Also she enjoys her tasks as head mistress and the work only seems to spur her on.

Last time the Education Minister had come, she was very happy to see the school and complimented us. She told me that she was so happy to come to this school, because it felt like a real school, not a cattle shelter. So many cars came with her."

What was different in your family that you felt allowed you to give importance to your education and work.?

"I can give so much time to work because I don't have to do much at home. My parents take care of all that. They get our tea and breakfast ready and we just get up at six, eat and go to school. We go back in the afternoon and lunch is ready at home. Since I have less responsibility at home, I feel I can take up and do more work in the school."

I was born in 1950 and when I was 6 years I joined the mission school here. In our house there was a time that we didn't have much and were very badly off. At that time, a booklet used to be published in our Christian samaj where they listed the names of children with ideal character, values etc. My name was in this list and Miss saab, the one who had bought my mother here saw it. She told me mother that if your girl is good, then let her go and study in Indore and we will look after her expenses. So I was sent to the mission school in Indore. "We were only five girls in our class of which I am the only one who has remained here. The others are married and one of them is a Nurse, but the rest are not working." There were very few girls in schools at that time.

I took quilts made out of our old clothes. My uncle who was better off than us, his daughter was with me. She had her matress and machardani. I used to feel poor, but I had spirit. Once she cut my quilt. I did the same to hers, and for many years I never spoke to her. She got married in gold. But I am on my feet now. I can earn my two roti's and more. Thats the difference between money and education.

My parents were very encouraging. Allowing your children esp girls, to go and study in Indore at that time was a very big thing. But in the way of money they didn't have much and they gave whatever they could. They paid for our travel to Indore which was 50 paisa at the time. That too would get difficult for them. They would also give us an additional 25 paisa as pocket money for the whole month's expenses. After finishing my studies in the Mission school in Indore, I came back to Haat Pipaliya and joined the Junior college which had just opened. In the Sarkari school I was the topper and my name is on the board in the school. We were four girls in the whole class. In my class there was another boy who is now a doctor. We both had topped in biology in the 12th. Then he went and Ayurvedic medical college forms, for himself and me. The form cost Rs. 500/- . He said his father was willing to give the money for the form and had said that we can both become doctors. I could return the money to him later. But at that time five hundred rupees was a lot of money as much as fifty thousand is now. But his father was ready to loan me that. However, But I refused. There was this whole question of money. How much could I burden my family or Miss Saab who was paying my tuition fee and other educational expenses? She even gave money for the clothes and books I needed. So I made the best choice available to me. I joined the Montessori training and came into the teaching line. The boy who was in my class is now a doctor. He is settled in Indore and has a clinic there. Even his son is a doctor. Miss Saab's name is Miss Baldings but we don't know where she is now. They went away to their country but they still give some funding in Indore for the education of the poor.

After school I went to Montessori training to Jabalpur with my sister, and did well there. I missed the gold medal by a single mark. There was a girl from Madras who came first. She got that extra mark in practicals. Then there was vacancies announced in the Education Department. I filled in the form and got selected. My elder sister had also filled the form and she was also got selected and we were posted in Chapra (about 12 km away). My mother then suggested to us that we both work here in the Mission School. But I refused. I felt I would be restricted here. I had lived out in the hostel and was quite independent. I wanted to see other places and I wasn't scared of going out. Why limit your self to one place. I wasn't pulled towards home so much.

My sister joined the Mission School. She was more attached to home, so it was easier to convince her. Her posting was also much further. How would she go? Walk? It would be a completely new place and new people. My mother didn't let her go. They (the mission school) used to pay Rs 250/- per month then which was quite a bit and I got Rs._125/- in the government school. But now Things have changed. The amount my sister gets in hand ,that much money I get as GPF alone. (Rs.1200-1300).

I went and immediately joined in Chapra. There was no means of transport so I traveled all the way on my cycle. The school was at 7:30 am and I was always on time. I served in 1971 there. Then I had some differences with the Janpad people so I got transferred to Devgadh. But I fought it out and came back to Chapra. Then I got transferred as a Science teacher to this Government Girls Middle School and was then posted in the Primary School after which I was sent to Bagli. Then I came back here as HM of the middle school. I have now completed 35 years of service between these three places.

In Chapra there was a lot of bhedbhav/ discrimination. Once, as part of encouraging and enrolling girls into school, seven of us had gone to someone's house. They offered us tea and we drank it. Later someone must have told them that I was a **of another religion**. They sent all their cups to their khet/ field because they felt that they had become impure. Later by some strange co-incidence that very night someone in their family fell ill and they had to come to the Mission Hospital. I saw them there and immediately recognized them and helped them out.

There they found all about me and the next day at school that woman sent her daughter to call me to her house and took me into their kitchen and fed me. She apologized for her behaviour. But that kind of discrimination was quite common.

There was another woman of some very "high caste". In her house no one was allowed into their kitchen. She also stayed here but she used to me call to her house, but always told me that if her mother in law asked me anything I shouldn't tell them who I was. She told the people in her house that I was a brahmin of an even higher gotre than them. She would tell me to keep quiet and not answer any questions. So in that way she used to take me to her house and kitchen and feed me there. There are different ways in which people try to break these barriers of caste.

When I came to this school, there was this one teacher of the Aggarwal caste. She had asked everyone to tell me that I should not take water from the common matka in the corridor. I was supposed to ask someone to give water so that the water didn't get desecrated. I said ok, I wasn't the HM then. She used to get her own bottle of water and it had a wide mouth. So one day I went and got a big nipple like the ones on babies' feeding bottles and put it on her bottle. I felt that if she was behaving like a child she should be treated like one. She got angry and broke her bottle, but how many bottles could she break? It became a joke and I had my share of fun.

Then one day when all the teachers had left and I was also about to leave, that teacher fainted. I took water from the matka and sprinkled it in on her face and made her drink some. Then I quickly stopped a vehicle on the road and took her to the hospital.

Later when she was feeling better, I asked her, "What will you do now?"

"Why?" she asked. "because I have completely defiled you. I put water in your mouth. But would you have rather that I left you to die?" From that day she stopped her *parhej*. She would eat with me and call me home into her kitchen.

Hemlata laughs as she tells us this, but somewhere her voice cracks and there is a mixture of many emotions, shame, anger, nonchalance and forgiveness.

There are two students of mine who have become Pandits. In Ujjain I had gone to the temple, suddenly I saw one of the pandits got up and came and touched my feet. He told me he was my ex student i was surprised. What are you doing. I said others touch you feet let it be, But he said. I am what i am because of you. And touched my feet in front of al the devotees.

When she was asked about how she felt about these practices, she firmly says that they oppose any kind of discrimination in their government school.

We accept all children and both poor and rich come here. She is very clear that where children come from or their identities are not important, but how they fair in studies and what results they get are. The government does a lot to encourage girls and poor students. Girls are given uniforms, two sets a year and also free books. This encourages the girls to come and the parents don't feel it is a burden either and feel motivated to send their children. We are very strict about the girls wearing uniform. It helps to reduce the differences in the rich and the poor girls otherwise those who cannot afford to wear certain kinds of clothes are always watching the others who wear nice clothes or jewelry. They don't pay attention to studies.

There is much change now she feels, at least in the school. What happens in the homes may be something different but inside the school you will find girls eating from each others tiffin. It also depends on the behavior of the teachers. If they encourage discrimination or practice it then children also pick it up. What exists outside the school is not in our control, but the school is a space which we can keep clean of all this. In many of the schools in the villages not far from here these things are still being practiced. It comes out clearly during the mid day meal. Many children especially the patidars and the other higher caste children don't eat along with the other children. But it is up to the teachers to deal with these things. They have to use all their skills and cajoling to instill these values at least inside the school. But yes it is true that in many schools especially in the primary schools it happens.

In our school there are 11 teachers and even we have set aside these prejudices, if we had any, and taken a strict stand on this. We know that in many schools there are teachers who don't get water filled by children who are

Dalit, but we try to do it the other way in this school. That sets an example. It is up to us as teachers to set the rules and children follow. We make sure that every one eats together. Even the labour that is working at the construction site.

What differences do you see in the town.

Now there is a college here and that has made a difference for the girls. They have started to enroll into college for further studies. Earlier girls would not even go beyond Class 8. Now families from close by village also send their daughters to college.

Of all the girls who pass out from here where do they go next, what kind of higher studies or jobs.

After secondary school, 50 percent get married and the rest go to 12th. And then from there around 25 percent go to college. If some get jobs after 12th then they too drop out.

What kind of jobs do your students go into

Teachers mostly and some get into nursing. We have not really kept a record as such, but I heard that one girl has gone into the police also. These days girls join the military also. Two girls had gone for police interviews but they couldn't get through. And one of them is married. She is still going to college.

There are two junior colleges in the town, which have allowed for more girls to be able to enroll. Even though the present ratio of girls in college is just about 1/4th. 'From all the girls that pass out from my school only 50% go to high school, and from them only about 25% will go to college. Amongst them too, if they get a job after 12th, they drop out. But still its an improvement. In '69 when I went to this college we were only four girls.' "A lot has changed", she says. "But many things have remained the same. Even today the most common job option for girls is teaching. Or may be some may try for nursing. Its so because the courses are not so expensive and one can do them after 12th."

"The change", she says "has come about in the number of girls getting into such work and the boys are aspiring for higher levels. While the girls are going to college here, families try to send their boys to Indore."