Learning to read and write at India's 'school for grannies'

Autres langues vivantes
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Video file

Deprived of an education as children, a handful of Indian women -- most of whom are widows and aged between 60 and 90 -- are finally fulfilling a life-long dream to become literate through a initiative near Mumbai.

Phangane (India) - 07 March 2017 - AFP (Peter HUTCHISON)

They wear uniforms, carry satchels and eagerly recite the alphabet in class, but the students here are different -- this is a "school for grannies".

Deprived of an education as children, the women -- most of whom are widows and aged between 60 and 90 -- are finally fulfilling a life-long dream to become literate through this unique initiative near Mumbai.

"I never went to school as a child. It feels great to come now and study with my friends. We have so much fun," 62-year-old Gulab Kedar tells AFP, beaming with pleasure. She along with the rest of the class wear matching pink saris.

The school, which marks its first anniversary on International Women's Day on Wednesday, is challenging traditional attitudes common to many Indian villages and helping its women shed the stigma of illiteracy.

Every day, 29 pupils take the short walk from their homes in Phangane village, in the Thane district of Maharashtra, to Aajibaichi Shala, meaning "school for grannies" in the local Marathi language.

Grandchildren wave them off, or sometimes accompany them, not that this group need to be cajoled into going. They proudly carry matching satchels each containing a slate, a piece of chalk and a textbook.

From 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm they sit cross-legged on the floor of the small outdoor classroom, which is made from bamboo, its roof thatched with hay.

Under the guidance of 30-year-old teacher Sheetal More they read simple text and carefully practise writing their names on their slates -- two things none of them could do 12 months ago. They also learn basic arithmetic.

- 'Proud' -

The women, many wearing bangles and elaborate nose rings, all have a similar story to tell. As youngsters they stayed at home or worked while their brothers got an education. They married young and were then expected to raise children and look after the home.

"My siblings went to school but I wasn't given that opportunity," explains 75-year-old Janabai Dajikedar. "At the bank I used to have to give my thumb print every time. There was a stigma attached and I felt shame. Now I am proud to sign my name," she adds.

The facility is funded by a local charitable trust and is the brainchild of Yogendra Bangar, a teacher at Phangane's primary school for the last three years.

He struck upon the idea early last year when some of the women complained that they couldn't take part in public readings during religious celebrations.

"We wanted to end their disdain and help them. We thought that if we could give these grandmothers a fair chance at education and literacy then it would make them very happy," explains Bangar, 41.

"At their age they aren't going to go looking for a job at a corporation but their joy at being able to provide a signature and read have increased their happiness manifold," he adds.

Bangar says the school -- including its colourful uniform, which was purposefully chosen -- is playing an important role in fostering respect for women. He also hopes it can be an example to other villages.

- 'Our diamonds' -

"Most of the grandmothers are widows and are meant to wear white to show mourning. We wanted to break this taboo and other older traditions to make every person feel they are equal and part of the community without any discrimination so we chose a pink uniform," he explains.

All 70 families in the village support the project and proudly dropped the grandmothers off on their first day of school.

"There was music and drums, lots of fanfare. It made us feel so special," recalls Kantabai More, 70, who loves it when her grandchildren help her with her homework.

"We huddle together and study, read, write, laugh and share stories. I'm content now," she explains.

The school has also become a focal point for social interaction and has boosted camaraderie amongst the women. It even held a sports day recently where the grannies played hide-and-seek, engaged in some traditional dancing and played a light-hearted and not too strenuous game of tag.

For the school's first birthday on Wednesday a big party is planned. More than 500 people from nearby villages, including around 100 grandmothers, are expected to attend the festivities, Bangar tells AFP.

"We will celebrate them for their invaluable contribution to our villages and our lives. They are our diamonds and we should treasure them."

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