

What would I do sitting at home?

-Nikki Shah (U.S.A)

These are the wise words of Anganwadi teacher, Geeta Verma. I spent my day visiting recent Balwadi conversions, Anganwadi. In the zones of North and South Shahdara, Pratham has partnered with ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services), Delhi to provide the instruction for their preschool, i.e. Anganwadi programs. I visited three classes, all relatively close to each other, on the same lane in fact, and all with a considerable number of students. This leads me to believe they are well placed.

The change over from the Pratham to the Government (ICDS) structure is a fairly new installment; it began in December of 2008. The benefits of the joint venture are that the government acquires the space and supplies the food, while Pratham oversees the instruction. This being a fairly new program I was curious as to how it was being received by the teachers who have now had the opportunity to operate in both systems.

The first class I went to was a very small space with approximately 16 children. All of whom seemed very engaged in their call and response activity with their teacher, a young looking woman with an unbelievably calm demeanor. "Chuk Chuk piche, Chuk Chuk niche" they stand in between staring at still tall dark skinned foreigner who has walked into the class. The teacher was quite eager to share samples of the students work with me, many of which were quite interesting, such as using pulses and other vegetables as part of her art s and crafts activity.

The second class which was across the main road and slightly down an alley had another class in session. This class also had one of the incredibly hardworking supervisors doing a field visit that day. This day there was a wedding occurring nearby causing the class to have a few members missing in action, though still leaving a healthy number in the class. This particular space had no fan, but the heat did nothing to dampen the spirits of the children in the class or the teacher.

The third class was where I had the opportunity to meet nine year Pratham veteran Ms. Sharma. She had the brightest smile and most exuberant personality . She is a Balwadi convert and is not the least bit miffed by the government control over certain aspects. One aspect being the one hour time they have been allotted, versus the 3 hours they had under Pratham's, Balwadi system.

Ms. Sharma's radiant attitude comes from the fact that she truly loves what she does. After nine years of working with Pratham her reasons for continuing are simple and genuine, "I am respected in the community," she says during our short conversation. She reminisced about the fact that she is still remembered by the students who are now in Class six, and how that makes her feel. She spoke like a true veteran teacher making the astute observation that in order for her to be effective the cooperation of the parents is paramount.

Another teacher, Beena, has also been with the Pratham for nine years and has had to operate under the Balwadi as well as the Anganwadi. She was a little more jolted by the government's one hour time allotment. She certainly preferred the balwadi system versus the new

anganwadi. She remarks that though what the government has done is a wonderful thing, by supplying food, it may become a large factor in the student's attendance.

All in all you could not help but be inspired by these women, being able to keep an open mind, and an upbeat spirit in the face of these challenges, is nothing short of a miracle. I was asked to write a note in the notebook of the first teacher I met. "You are a truly a special person and the impact on the lives of these children cannot be expressed." This could be written for any of the teachers, and supervisors, as they all must share Ms. Sharma's poignant point of view, "What would I do sitting at home?"