

Cops start school in tribal village, liquor manufacture and sale dry up

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WHEN PURNEA SP Nishant Tiwari reached tribal-dominated Chanka village under Srinagar block a few months ago, the locals were apprehensive. It was not often that a senior police officer visited.

Prohibition had given them another reason to fear. Chanka, which has about 4,000 tribals, was identified as a hub of manufacture, sale and consumption of country liquor.

However, the police did not visit Chanka to conduct raids or arrest liquor traders. They had gone with a proposal to open a school for out-of-school-children in the evenings.

Tribal elders initially did not believe the police, but eventually saw merit in the idea. Upendra Hansda, who has studied till Class 12, offered his verandah and the open space in front of it. Thus began "Meri Pathsala" (My School), an initiative of Purnea police to reach out to the community and tackle prohibition.

"It was more of a psychological and diplomatic move to teach children, but indirectly drive home the message of prohibition. As we are there in the village twice a week, manufacture and sale of liquor have come down drastically," says Tiwari, who has started similar schools in three other villages as a pilot project. "Besides regular policing, pencils can also take us to prohibition."

The programme incurs minimum cost, he says. Once the police start such schools, villagers come forward to work as teachers. The local inspector or sub-inspector teaches twice a week in the school, which runs between 6 pm and 7.30 pm daily.

Srinagar police outpost sub-inspector Mithilesh Kumar travels 6 km on his motor-cycle from his police station to Meri Pathsala at Chanka village. Children aged five to 13 years sit on a mat with their notebooks and slates. A whiteboard is placed there by Hansda. The teacher for the day, Kumar



A child takes lessons from sub-inspector Mithilesh Kumar. Santosh Singh

checks the notebooks.

There is no bar on school-going children attending Meri Pathsala. Soni Kumari, who studies in Class 7 at the village middle school, is asked to write the names of the chief minister and prime minister. She does it successfully. The others clap for her.

Younger children learn the Hindi alphabet and numbers. "As children of different classes sit together, we have to teach them one by one. There cannot be common lecture," Kumar says, as he watches five-year-old Shubham Kumar writing Hindi letters. Shubham is no longer afraid of "police uncle". It is now the turn of Rahul Kumar Tutu, 8, to write the names of five flowers. He gets some spellings wrong. The policeman asks him to revise his task at home.

The guardians stand at one end and watch. Badki Devi says: "This is a very good move. Our children discuss school at home."

Asked if their husbands had quit drinking, Devi says: "Almost. They know the police are around. *Yeh school daru chhudwane ke liye*

bhi hai (this school also aims at weaning people from drinking)".

Her neighbours Murni Devi and Sanjo Devi agree. When Murni Devi is asked about domestic violence, she says: "They know we have easy access to police."

"Husbands know the wives can call the police if they start drinking. Donning a uniform is a good experience but being a teacher is no less exhilarating," says Kumar, adding that Chanka has not reported any case under the liquor law since the school began.

Chanka has a primary and middle school but the high school is 6 km away. The entire village has less than 15 graduates.

Village elders Dasrath Marandi, Pargan Murmu and Sawan Soren say the locals have got the message of prohibition. "These says one cannot find a drunken person in Chanka. Six months ago one could see drunken people all around," says Marandi.

Pargan Murmu, a labourer, says: "It gives me great happiness to see my grandson attend Meri Pathsala."