

Make way for light

By voluntarily paying for vegetables for mid-day meal and books, teachers in Ukhrul, Manipur, are going beyond their designated roles to ensure that students get quality education, reports Masoyo Hunphun Awungashi



When Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the nation on our 73rd Independence Day, his speech focussed on economy and how the government is planning to invest in infrastructure to drive the economy. The same day, students of Ngachonmi Fund Primary School, the only government school in Awungtang locality of Ukhrul town in the district which goes by the same name in Manipur, gathered in the rain-soaked ground of Bakshi High School for the celebrations. They had to defy incessant rains, that had rendered the

roads and public grounds almost inaccessible to its nearly 27, 000 residents, to be a part of the celebrations.

Most of the school and public grounds in Ukhrul do not have blacktop. To participate in the I-Day parade, the teachers of the primary school decided to arrange gumboots for the students which were funded partially by the school and the teachers themselves. New socks and ribbons were also arranged. Twelve teachers including the principal contributed Rs 300 each for purchasing the material. "Without gumboots, our students would not have been able to march on this muddy and slippery ground," said Theresa Chiphang, a primary teacher at the school. Theresa was glad that they were able to overcome these challenges and make the celebrations possible for the children.

Located 81 km away from Manipur's capital, Imphal, Ukhrul is a quiet picturesque town inhabited by the Tangkhul Naga tribe. Like the rest of the north-eastern state, it is blessed with natural wealth. However, the state of education in this primary school needs immediate attention. Ngachonmi Fund Primary School has about 80 students. The children studying here belong to the most marginalised section of society. Most of the parents are farmers who are unable to afford school uniforms, shoes, books and stationary for their children. According to Theresa, "There are children as young as three who come to school without shoes as they are expensive and unaffordable for their parents."

The Department of Education, Manipur Government, allocates Rs 400 per student every year for Ngachonmi Fund Primary School, which is insufficient to meet the cost of uniforms. "With Rs 400, we are able to buy only a shirt and a pant or a skirt. It gets extremely cold in winters and children find it difficult to attend school without sweaters," said Wungchuiwon HA, one of the teachers in the school. For students whose pants, skirts and shirts are in good, wearable condition, the school provides them sweater, the teacher informed.

In March 2019, Wungchuiwon and Theresa along with the other teachers decided to do something for the students to brave the long heavy monsoon rains. About 300 metres away from their school, is a prestigious private institution called Savio School, which is run by the Catholic church. It is attended by children from privileged and well-to-do families. This year, the school's principal announced the introduction of new uniforms for its students. Sensing an opportunity here, the government school teachers spread the word that they were collecting the old school uniforms of Savio School. Many parents and students came forward and donated their old uniforms. At the end of the month, over 60 woollen red sweaters, pants and skirts were collected as part of this drive.

"I received a sweater, a skirt, ribbons, two notebooks, pencils, a pair of gumboots, and even socks from my teachers," said Leishichon Hongray, 10, a student of Class IV, who participated in the I-Day parade. She feels much more comfortable in the new uniform than in her old one. "I feel warm now," she told us.

"The red sweater I am wearing now, the pant, tie, shirt, and socks, all were given to me by the teachers. Just two days ago, my class teacher gave me six textbooks and pencils," said Kachuikhan Sareo, a nine-year-old studying in Class IV. Kachuikhan belongs to a family of farmers. "My parents would not have been able to afford books and uniform for me. I am happy that I have got new uniform and books." Theresa said that all the students now come dressed in their new uniforms.

Funds allocated for buying books and mid-day meals by the Manipur state government have never been regular. S Tammila, the principal of the primary school, elaborated, "It's September now. The year has almost ended yet we haven't received funds from the government for 2018 and 2019. We have to contribute from our own pockets to buy books so that the students do not miss out on their studies. Sometimes, we ask the senior students to give their textbooks to the juniors after the annual exam results. I have even bought vegetables and meat from my own pocket because there are times when we only receive rice for the mid-day meal." The money is reimbursed to the teachers when the school receives the allocated funds.

Another important issue flagged by the teachers was that of the prescribed books by the government. From the prescribed syllabus for primary schools in Manipur, only Mathematics, English, and Tangkhul --the language spoken by the natives of Ukhrul — textbooks are provided by the government. Subjects such as English Grammar, General Knowledge and Moral Science are not issued. "To ensure holistic teaching, we teach these subjects to them, because it is the right of the students to have access to these basic subjects which will prepare them to become responsible citizens in the future and stay at par with the privileged students. There are parents who can afford these textbooks which aren't provided by the government but for those who can't afford, we buy the books for them from our pockets," said Theresa.

—Charkha Features