

Rahul Andhale: The Kind Conductor

Children from poor backgrounds tend to face many problems in school. They may not be able to afford basic things also like pens and pencils, notebooks, etc

Often, in such situations, help is offered by teachers or others who are better off. But if you were told that a bus conductor had helped 52 such needy children, would you believe it? This generous person Mr. Rahul Andhale is from Beed district and works as a bus conductor in Shriwardhan, Raigad district.



(Mr. Rahul Andhale visits slum area to find out of school children)

I was amazed to learn that a person who had nothing to do with the education sector, and who had a busy in State Transport job, was helping needy students. Wanting to meet him and his family, I travelled to Ramnagar in Gevrai division. Sheetal Naikwade, a teacher at the District Council school there, was full of praise for him. She told me that he not only provided financial help to very poor children but also counselled their parents about the importance of education.

I met his parents and his wife, unassuming folk who worked in the fields, and thanked them profusely for supporting Rahul in the good work he was doing.

The next day, I spoke to Rahul over the phone. He was overwhelmed to receive a call from an Extension Officer Mr. Kalam Patil, I am very happy that you went to my village and spoke to my family, but whatever I am doing is because I get encouragement from selfless people like you,' he said. 'While working as a bus conductor, I get an opportunity to talk to people. I really value education, and I can make friends easily. So I often end up chatting with students and their guardians when they travel on my bus.'

'When students don't have money for bus tickets, I buy their tickets. I offer to help with their school fees, uniforms, books, and so on if they are too poor to afford these things. When I was young, my teachers helped me in the same way. I will always be grateful for that, and will never forget it.'

So far, Mr. Andhale has helped 52 needy children from Raigad, Nasik, Jalna, Ahmednagar and Beed districts. I invited him to come to our school and meet the teachers. For two years now, at our annual teachers' meets, I have been arranging a conversation with a scholar from the field of education through a video call. This gives our teachers the opportunity to share their ideas and thoughts with eminent educationists.

In July 2018, we had a meet for teachers from two of our centers, Kanya Dhondrai, and Bagpimpalgaon, which was attended by 120 teachers. This time we had a video call with Rahul Andhale in Shrivardhan. The teachers saw a man with a pleasant smile standing beside an ST bus in his brownish uniform.

Mr. Andhale said, 'Whatever I am today is because of my teachers and my family. My grandmother always taught us not to let anyone go empty-handed. My teachers always helped me with the school materials that my family could not afford. Now is the time to give back to society. I try and help needy students in whichever ways I can.'

'If you keep your eyes and heart open, you can see how many people need help, and you also want to help them. Once an old man was traveling on my bus with two of his granddaughters. I, being the friendly sort, started chatting with him. I learned from him that the girls' parents both worked as sugarcane cutters in Karnataka. He was dropping the girls off in Pune, where they would stay with relatives. When I asked about their school, the girls said at once, "We love going to school, but we have no money. We can't afford it." I felt terrible on hearing this. I managed to get both girls admitted to a school in Pune, and I have taken on the full financial responsibility for

their schooling. It gives me immense happiness to know that they are getting a good education.'

After this video call, we teachers kept in touch with Mr. Rahul Andhale.

At one point, when Rahul was back home in Gevrai, we found a young student called Shankar Teli selling books by the roadside. He lived in a very poor locality in Gevrai and attended the Mahatma Phule School which was quite a distance from his home. We felt we must have won the trust of the children in the area when, despite being embarrassed, Shankar felt able to tell us that what he desperately needed was a cycle.

We decided to consider this. Rahul, too, decided to talk to others in the locality to understand what sort of difficulties other students might be facing. We were shocked and dismayed to discover that between 40 and 45 children from Shankar's neighborhood had never been to school.

This posed a huge challenge for us. We decided to carry out a survey and meet these children's guardians. But first, Mr. Andhale went and met the children. He made friends with them and gathered some basic information which proved very useful.

Some two or three km from the Gevrai-Beed national highway is the settlement of the Nathjogi Bahurupi community. They have migrated here from Solapur and other nearby districts, and live in temporary huts made from bits of cloth and plastic. Shankar was from this settlement.

Bahurupis are known for their daredevil acrobatic performances but this traditional occupation has ceased to bring in enough money. They have started selling posters of gods and goddesses, religious and general knowledge books, maps, and calendars. One of their leaders buys these from a big city, such as Hyderabad. They then sell these in the weekly markets, art fairs, and near temples. Except for Shankar, all members of the community were illiterate.

How ironical, that those who have had no access to education themselves should be selling educational books on the streets.

The community spoke a mix of Telugu and Marathi. We went there with sweets and snacks, and slowly made friends with the children. When we asked if they would like to go to school, they began jumping about with

glee. 'We want to go to school, we would like to go to school!' they chanted. We were moved by their enthusiasm.

The next step was to meet the families, to whom we spoke about the importance of, and need for, education. We did our best to persuade them that this was the only key to a better life. The adults we met had a point. They said they would be happy to send the children to school, but it was too far. The highway had too much traffic. They were concerned about the children's safety.

Before leaving, we promised to find a solution.

The first thing we did, with contributions from some teachers and from Rahul, was to buy a brand new cycle for Shankar. He was thrilled. Now he was even more determined to study hard. We had made one child happy but kept thinking of the plight of the other children and their guardians.

We discussed the matter with Deputy Director Dr. Shobha Khandare, Equity Dept Head Mr. Kshirsagar and Assistant Programme Officer Nutan Maghade, Equity Dept., SCERT determined as we were to bring these children into the educational mainstream, we thought of exploring whether a vehicle might be arranged through an NGO or through a community initiative to ferry them to and from school.

In the meantime, three teachers began living in the settlement and teaching the children there informally – through song and dance, storytelling, games, and so on.



(School Chale hum!' students going towards the school for the first time)
We are happy to announce that on August 15, 2018, our 72nd Independence Day, all 42 children were enrolled in the District Council school in Gevrai.

We feel proud and happy to have been able to pave a path towards education, and freedom from illiteracy and poverty, for these children.

I am sure there are many more selfless and generous people like Rahul Andhale in our state.

I feel confident that the dream of having a Maharashtra state that is free of out-of-school children will one day become a reality.

Mrs. Anuradha Chavan, Equity Dept, SCERT