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Others were admitted but were not attending classes largely because of the caste discrimination they encountered, both from teachers and upper-caste students. Cattle grazed in the premises of many schools, and the dispensing of mid-day meals was irregular.

"First we had to tell people that education was their childrens right and that they cannot be denied it

While Kuldeep personally visited 20 villages, his team ended up covering a whopping 103 villages!

education. The team members found that many children had been denied school admission outright.

Instead of one, they visited three villages in a day with their message: Every child had a right to

because of their caste or religion. We had to build up confidence in both parents and children," reveals Baldan Singh.

The children who were refused admission were handed Right to Education cards. They were told to show these cards to any school authority that denied them admission. Taking caste prejudices head on worked. Recalcitrant school officials found themselves cornered. In one instance, children demonstrated outside the home of an absentee teacher, holding placards that read, "Teacher, aao aur padho" ("Teacher, come and teach."). When storerooms for the mid-day meal provisions were found

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locked, Prayaas members had them opened and ensured that meal schedules were followed. They left behind their mobile numbers so that they could be contacted if there were such disruptions again.

In most places, the team also noticed that parents and teachers blamed each other. While the parents argued that teachers were absenting themselves, the teachers accused the parents of not sending their wards to school. To solve this problem, triangular Parent-Teacher-Student associations were formed, where everybody could together sort out their differences.

The team also wrote simple slogans on village walls: 'Ghar ghar vidya deep jalao' ('light the lamp of education in each home'); 'Bachcha bachee sabhi padhao' ('teach both son and daughter'); 'Padhee likhee ladki roshni ghar ki ('an educated girl is the light of a home') were just some of the inspiring messages.

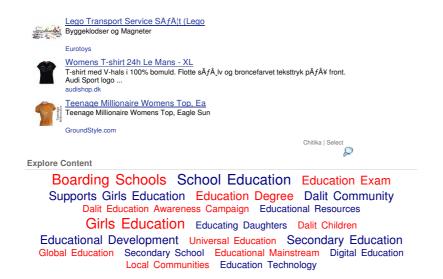
Information on education is combined with entertainment. Skits, highlighting the importance of schooling, were enacted for local communities. Public discussions on school education were conducted, so that views could be freely expressed or countered. This was followed by a two-month-long Dalit Shiksha Jagrukh Abhiyyan (Dalit Education Awareness Campaign).

The female members of the team were entrusted with a special task of acting as motivators for girls' education. Explains Shilima Gautam, 23, a Prayaas member, who is preparing for her Bachelor of Education exam, "Take the Pattipura village in Jalaun. It has a 100 percent Dalit population and none of the girls went to school. So we spent a lot of time here stressing on the importance of educating daughters." Shilima, who has three sisters, works as a 'kisaan mita' (friend of farmer - a semi government post - who provides local farmers with information about good farming practices) and earns Rs 1,000 (US\$1=Rs 44.6) per month. With this she supports herself and her college-going sister, Neelima, who dreams of becoming a police officer. The sisters - trained as motivators - live independently in Jalaun in a rented room about 55 kilometers away from their village, Gohan. They are fortunate to have an enlightened father. Says Shilima, "My father, a watch repairer, supports girls' education. He believes that no development - whether individual or national - is possible without education."

Interestingly, not only has Kuldeep helped to motivate teachers, parents and students, he has inspired many youngsters like him. Sometimes Kuldeep is a bit embarrassed by the attention. But he is clear that school education is the first step to addressing growing social disparities and poverty. "I ask everyone just one question: How many officers put their children into government schools? I tell them that in this question is hidden the answer to improving government schooling and ensuring the Right to Education of every child," he says. It is precisely such awareness raising that will help in the implementation of the newly passed Right to Education Act, in both letter and spirit.

Young Kuldeep is confident that Orai is slowly moving towards achieving Millennium Development Goal Two: Universal primary education. Because it is only when the poorest, most socially disempowered communities access schooling can there be a lasting change. By flashing their Right To Education cards and demanding that the lamp of education be lit in every home, Orai's children are signaling change in a forgotten region of the country.

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