

Rahrai : From homemaker to a trusted village leader

This summer provided another opportunity to review the progress of our projects in India and to see firsthand how the schools and social programmes continue to develop. During my visit, I met teachers and students, checked accounts, visited classrooms and computer rooms, and joined activities taking place in the surrounding villages.

One particularly meaningful moment came during a village meeting in *Rahrai*, where *Preeti* shared her story. Her experience offered a powerful example of how the work carried out around our schools can gradually change not only the lives of individual women, but also those of their families and communities.

Preeti came to *Rahrai* after her marriage in 2012. For several years, her life was centered almost entirely on her home and her three children. Her husband, *Rajendra*, works as an electrician. Their children — *Cheshta*, *Simran* and *Adarsh* — all study at *St. Anthony's School* in *Rahrai*. *Preeti* wanted to do

something more and become financially independent, but she had no clear path forward.

That began to change in 2021, when she joined a women's *Self-Help Group* supported by *Gramin Manav Vikas Samiti* (GMVS is the local partner of *Anthony's Bread*). Her enthusiasm and willingness to learn were quickly noticed, and she was encouraged to take on more responsibility.

She was later selected under the *National Rural Livelihoods Mission* to become a *Bank Sakhi* — a woman trained to provide basic banking services within the village. After completing her training at RSETI in Moradabad, she received financial assistance of 75,000 rupees, which allowed her to buy a laptop, printer and internet equipment and to open a small banking service point near her home.

Today, villagers come to *Preeti* for cash deposits and withdrawals and for other basic banking services. This is particularly helpful for elderly people and for families who would otherwise have to travel to a bank in town. Even on Sundays and public holidays, when banks are closed, people know that they can often turn to her for urgent transactions.

Preeti proudly shares how her life has changed.



Villagers now turn to *Preeti* for banking, documents and online services.

But *Preeti* did not stop there. She gradually learned to use her equipment and digital skills to help villagers with *Aadhaar* and ration card printouts, applications, photographs and various online forms. What began as a small banking point has become a useful service centre for the whole neighbourhood. *Preeti* now combines this work with her responsibilities at home and earns around approximately 10,000 rupees per month. More importantly, her role in the village has changed. She is no longer confined to the four walls of her house. She has become a confident working woman, a trusted point of contact for others and an example to women around her. Her influence also extends to education. Her own children attend *St. Anthony's School*, and she actively encourages neighboring families to educate their children, especially their daughters. She has already persuaded several women to give their girls opportunities they might otherwise have missed.

Today, *Preeti* is not only earning her own living. She is helping others move forward with her.

Jadwar continues to grow

As the new school year began after the summer holidays, there was much to be thankful for. The examination results from the previous year were satisfactory, and around 120 new students joined *St. Anthony's School* in *Jadwar*. Once again, the school continued to move forward despite the ongoing challenge of finding and retaining qualified teachers in a rural area. This year too, a new group of teachers from South India was appointed to





As the school building takes shape in Jadwar, so do the hopes of the people of the villages around it.

strengthen the teaching staff. Construction work in *Jadwar* is also progressing steadily. After the completion of the first floor, work is now continuing on the second floor, which we hope to complete by the end of this year.

When the system pushes back

In the last issue of our newsletter, we wrote about the irregularities discovered in the *Right to Education* (RTE) admissions at *Dugawar* and the investigation that followed. The case had a wider impact, and other schools were also scrutinized. In our own case, the administration confirmed irregularities and canceled several admissions of children who did not appear to fulfill the conditions for free education. We thought the matter was settled. It was not. Pressure soon came from different levels of the administration and from influential people asking us to admit some of the same children whose admissions had been canceled. Even after the official admission period closed, the calls continued, and we are still receiving them in mid-September.

The women from *Dugawar* who had first raised the complaint have remained firm. They also complained through the *Chief Minister's portal*, arguing that if any disputed admissions were imposed, then the genuinely poor children who had originally been excluded should be considered first. The resistance has been strong. So far, neither the women nor *St. Anthony's Dugawar* have

given in. For us, the principle remains simple: places intended for poor children should go to poor children.

From a name and a photo to a real meeting

Manju and her daughter *Tanishka*, originally from *Kerala* and now living in the United States, first came to know about our projects through *Dr. Arunima Roy*, a member of *GMVS* who regularly visits the schools and villages to provide medical care. This year, they accompanied *Dr. Arunima* during one of her visits, giving *Manju* the opportunity to meet her sponsored child in *Rahrai* for the first time.

Here is how *Tanishka* describes their visit:

"What is the cultural difference between America and India?" "Do you have any insight into improving safety and security for women in this country?" "As a person going into business, who was your biggest inspiration?" These questions barely scratch the surface of the endless curiosity of the children of *St. Anthony's School*.

In the discussions my mother and I had with the students in the villages of *Asmoli* and *Rahrai*, we shared our perspectives on the similarities and differences between India and the USA regarding education, culture and work experiences. We also had the opportunity to learn more about the students' goals, dreams and families. From questions about life in America to requests for career advice, the students we talked to impressed

us with their maturity and forethought. Seeing these young minds be so ambitious was inspiring, and I admired how *St. Anthony's School* and its staff supported their students' initiative.

For instance, every wall of the *Dugawar* building displayed information about a potential career, without distinction of gender. In a culture where girls in rural areas are still sometimes encouraged to give up their education, it was refreshing to see clear evidence of the school supporting the aspirations of young women. We were also warmly welcomed by the residents of *Rahrai* village. We had the unique opportunity to walk around, visit homes and talk to local families. This part of the trip was particularly eye-opening, as it gave us a firsthand glimpse of what life is like in a poor rural Indian village. I was able to communicate with the women there, both through my own broken Hindi and through song and dance, which transcend language. By sharing stories, dancing and laughing with the community, I learned more about the families of some of the students who attend *St. Anthony's School*. This gave me a greater appreciation for the dedication shown by the students despite the challenges they may face in their personal lives.

Overall, visiting the schools was a valuable lesson in how making education accessible can be the first step in inspiring children to pursue their passions and build a better future. I am grateful to have had the chance to share my experiences with the students of *St. Anthony's School*, and I am excited to see where these bright young people will go in the future.

