

The untold Poorna story

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The conquest of the Everest still remains the supreme achievement for mountaineers all over the world. The mountain no longer poses the unforgiving threat it did eight decades ago, when its mists swallowed up the gallant British mountaineer George Mallory, but it still reserves its right to take life at will. Earlier this May it killed expert Sherpas with a swift avalanche shaking the confidence of all mountaineers and forcing some to abandon their quest for the summit. However, early in the morning of Sunday, 25 May, two children from disadvantaged communities of the new state of Telengana made it courageously to the top. One was an 18-year-old dalit boy, Anand Kumar, from Khammam, and the other a 13-year-old Lambada tribal girl, Malavath Poorna, from Nizamabad.

The achievement of 13-year-old Malavath Poorna, a tribal girl from Telengana, in sumitting Mount Everest last May is a pointer to the power of pro-poor policies.

Poorna, who became the youngest female to conquer Everest, had run on ahead of her companion to reach the summit by six in the morning! One recalls with amazement Edmund Hillary's account of the first successful climb 61 years ago, the tortured step-by-step ascent to the crest of the great mountain.

The story behind this little Telengana girl's feat is even more astonishing. More than 30 years ago, like several others, the erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh (AP) had a string of badly managed and neglected social welfare hostels for poor children, ill-kept, with poor food and no one to take responsibility for the children. It was open knowledge that many girls were being sexually abused by the big-wigs of the region. The late S R Sankaran, an idealistic Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer who became a legend in his lifetime, was then Principal Secretary for Social Welfare, and he changed a few of these hostels into residential schools, with live-in teachers in charge. The improvement was immediate. Soon, all the hostels were converted into residential schools, managed by a young IAS officer, under a semi-independent body, the AP Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society. Within a few years of the changeover, the late Smarajit Ray, another IAS officer with great commitment, proudly showed this writer a list of the state's SSLC graduates, four from the schools coming among the top 10.

Since that time 20 years ago, these residential schools for underprivileged poor children have consistently shown much higher academic standards than the state average. The total number of these schools has grown to 291. Around 85% of the present strength of 1,70,000 students are dalits, with the rest being tribal and other poor children. For the last few years, over a dozen of these children have gained admission each year into the elite Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and last year 22 passed the All India Engineering Entrance Examination. So great is the pressure nowadays that admission to Class V is by lottery. The expenditure per child per month ranges modestly between Rs 750 and Rs 1,050. We must surely hope that the new government of Telengana will fulfil its promise to provide quality education for all, and build enough of these excellent schools to meet every poor child's need.

Praveen Kumar, an officer in the Indian Police Service (IPS), who is at present in charge of the schools system, believing in the old Latin adage *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body) has provided sports opportunities to these children unavailable even in many elite schools. Many children from AP were sent to Darjeeling for training in mountaineering. Poorna and Anand were finally selected to make the attempt to the top of Everest. These children, unmindful of the caste rage simulated by academics on occasion, laid photos of B R Ambedkar and S R Sankaran side by side on the summit. The spirit of Sankaran, who had gently refused the Padma Bhushan, would be pleased at this simple heartfelt gesture.

An even more important message the children sent to leaders is the knowledge of loss suffered by all of India through its callous caste system and the refusal of the administration to give the poor access to skills, credit and assets. Poorna's achievement, great as it is, is only the tip of a mountain of accomplishment that could come into being with affordable genuine pro-poor policies, like the one 30 years ago that converted dysfunctional hostels into dynamic residential schools for the poor.

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