

## Against All Odds

Travel twenty kilometers away from any tourist destination, and you get a real flavor of rural India. Posh hotels and resorts, large and wonderfully decorated restaurants and manicured lawns suddenly transform into dirt roads where cows and dogs roam around freely, countless small shops, road side eating joints and tea stalls looking for customers. Everyone seems to be doing something, no matter how insignificant it may seem to the onlooker.

And then there are sights which make one smile and wonder at the same time. For example, seeing people washing clothes and taking bath in ponds along with buffalos always makes one wonder whether the net result from this undertaking is cleaning or further contamination! For me, most enjoyable is the sight of children in school dress waking in small groups. They look happy and disciplined. One wonders, how far is their school and what kind of education these children are getting?

While relaxing and refreshing, these countryside surroundings also evoke an uneasy feeling. Are these people getting their fair share of opportunities in education, knowledge, health care, entrepreneurship and wealth? In outskirts of Udaipur, I suddenly found myself asking these questions.

After enjoying a very old and extremely beautiful temple complex, we happened to come across several children roughly in age group of 8-13 years. They were playful, looked happy, slim and fit. Certainly, no worrisome issues of childhood obesity there! They all go to school and learn English, Math etc. We started to have an enjoyable conversation with them, challenging them with simple math problems etc. They did not shy away from us. Even though the majority of answers they gave us were incorrect, they tried hard and gave their best.



Among them was one little girl, who was taking the challenge just like Maharana Pratap stood against mighty Akbar. Both her parents do manual labor in nearby fields. They are uneducated and cannot read and write their names. Still, they elected to send their daughter to school, which I assume, is with the hope that her



daughter's life will be better than theirs.  
But will this dream be realized?



Meeting this little girl took me 30 years back in memory lane. I was a senior resident in Internal Medicine at All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. I was in outpatient clinic working like a robot with a critical goal of finishing my clinic by 3 to 3.30 PM. There entered an elderly woman in mid seventies with a child no more than 12 to 13 years of age. Since it was not a pediatrics clinic, I was about to tell her that she is in a wrong clinic. Before I could say anything, she had a bout of productive cough. It was clear that she and not the child was the patient. The child took charge and informed me that her grandma has been sick for past 3-4 months. I will spare the details, but it became very clear to me that she has tuberculosis. I wrote for a miniature chest radiograph and tried to direct them to radiology department. The child told me that he will figure it out. He seemed confident.

Sure enough, he came back after an hour with the miniature chest radiograph. A presumptive diagnosis of tuberculosis was made. I wrote the standard anti-tubercular therapy starting with four drugs for two months and two drugs for an additional four months. All the drugs and instruction were obviously written in Queen's language. I told them to pick medication from pharmacy, start treatment and come back in a month. While explaining this to child, I suddenly asked my self- "really"?

Do I really expect a 12 year child to understand and make her grand mother take all these medications appropriately? So I did something unthinkable. I asked the child to go and pick the medications and come back and wait for me to finish my 200+ patient clinic. He did that. After finishing my last patient, I approached them to give proper instructions, with medications in hand.

I was flabbergasted.

Folks, he had already figured it all out. Just looking at my paper prescription and drugs names on the strip, he exactly knew the entire regimen. He figured it all out by matching the initial alphabets of the drugs (I=INH, R=Rifampin, P=Pyrazinamide, E=Ethambutol) on the prescription and the medication strips. Speechless, I wanted to know more about this child, who was obviously more intelligent than I ever was.



He came from a poor state in the eastern part of India. Both his parents were manual laborers. He was going to a local school. He knew his alphabets. When his grandmother became ill, there was no local help. His parents had to work every day to make ends meet. At this time, the child volunteered to take her to the premier medical institute of India, where the “good” doctors could provide world class care to 200 + sick fellows in a half day outpatient clinic. He travelled by train for more than 800 Km. He found his way from railway station to AIIMS by public transport (not in an AC car). Above all, he made it to my clinic without help of any benevolent soul who will cut through the red tape and get his sick grandmother to my clinic; of course for a “nominal” service charge.

After working in several top institutes in the United States and meeting some very accomplished people, I am still looking for a more intelligent and confident individual than this child was. But I wonder every now and then as to what happened to him. Could he pursue further education or did financial pressures pull him to do manual labor to add to the unjustifiably meager earnings of his parents? Is he a physician, CEO, engineer, teacher, scientist or an entrepreneur (hopefully, not a politician from that state), or is he still living the dream which will never become a reality?

After meeting this little girl, I cannot help thinking about her future on the same lines. How long will she pursue education? Equally important, will she find an institution that has means and expertise to educate her? Will financial pressures rob her of all her future and force her to work in fields or as an unappreciated and underpaid domestic worker?

Give her opportunities in education and she can be anything. If she succeeds, she could contribute more to society than those born with a silver spoon. Unfortunately, the odds are seriously against her and I fear that she may never realize her full potential without proper education and fair opportunities. On one hand she could live a life that every human on this planet deserves, and on other, she could spend all her life struggling to have basic human needs and with dreams that have no chance of becoming reality. Education is the only way for her to achieve her full potential. She does not need charity. She needs fair opportunities and a level playing field.

I have no question that the child I met 30 years ago had potential to go very high, if he was given fair opportunities. I feel the same about this little girl and all other children we met 20 km out of city limits of beautiful Udaipur.

**Dr. Praseon Jain MD**  
West Virginia, USA