



The Tale of Punsari

My experiments with truth on
Primary education in rural India

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The Beginning

Like many NRIs, I have nurtured a secret longing to give back to my motherland. In my case I have been passionate about giving back where it matters most – the children of India. More than 25% of our 1.2 billion population are in the impressionable phase where good education can seal a better future for them and their families. My passion for educating India's children led me to join Pratham USA in 2003. Pratham is the largest education NGO in India focusing on children from 6-14 years of age.

After reading many stories over a decade and gathering better understanding of primary education issues, I received a golden opportunity in 2015 when my employer, Intel, generously gave me a 6-week sabbatical. Instead of gallivanting my family off to Europe or another exotic location, I decided to spend this time in Punsari - a small village in North Gujarat. Why Punsari? I had heard of Punsari as a model village of India in media reports and how it represented everything about the new “shining” India. The optimist in me wanted to visit and learn first-hand about this modern Indian village which in my mind was the complete opposite of the rural India I had grown up in.

After my initial day visit of the village, I came back with an impression that indeed Punsari is a model village that had finally reaped the fruits of progress India has been striving for since its independence. The Sarpanch of the Village, Himanshu Patel, was a gracious host and made an extra effort to show me as well Zee News crew around the village for a couple hours. He took pride in showcasing the infrastructure improvements in his village. Gone were the days of women walking miles down dusty cobbled path to fetch water. Instead, Punsari has gleaming concrete roads, clean drinking water that is easily accessible, toilets and even Wi-Fi access! He also highlighted the zero dropout rate of the village schools. Mr. Patel's palpable pride in his village was contagious and I returned back to US with dreams of returning to Punsari to conduct research on how Punsari's development model could be replicated across thousands of villages in

India. My goal was to find out how the young Sarpanch brought these changes and created unheard of awareness on many issues among the villagers with limited resources. What was the governance model within Panchayat Raj?

The Reality

I could barely hold my excitement as I made my trip back to Punsari six months later in June 2015. I had done my homework, identified the scope of the project and was ready to set the ball rolling amidst the gleaming paved roads in Punsari. I was transported back to reality when I first saw the facilities Mr. Patel had arranged for my visit. Though comfortable, they were very different from my lifestyle in the US. I got my first taste of rustic living– transitioning from air-conditioned comfort to a noisy fan that worked on its own will, a leaky bathroom that caused puddles of water for mosquitoes to breed on and above all, no concept of a trash bin! Yet I realized that this humble abode would be the dream of the majority of residents in Punsari or any village of India and once again I felt inspired in my belief that good education is the ultimate tool to end the economic disparity so prevalent in India. I spent the first few days cleaning the place, buying basic amenities like a clean bed sheet, trash bin and a kerosene stove for cooking. It was quite a humbling experience!

I set out to explore the neighborhoods, make observations and identify potential collaborators. During the course of my interaction with youth as well as adults, I sensed a major issue of an outdated mind-set and lack of responsibility. I could not get anyone to commit to meeting on-time or come through on commitments that I saw as simple chores for the village. Despite the claims of Wi-Fi access & availability throughout the village I could not access Wi-Fi outside the Panchayat office.

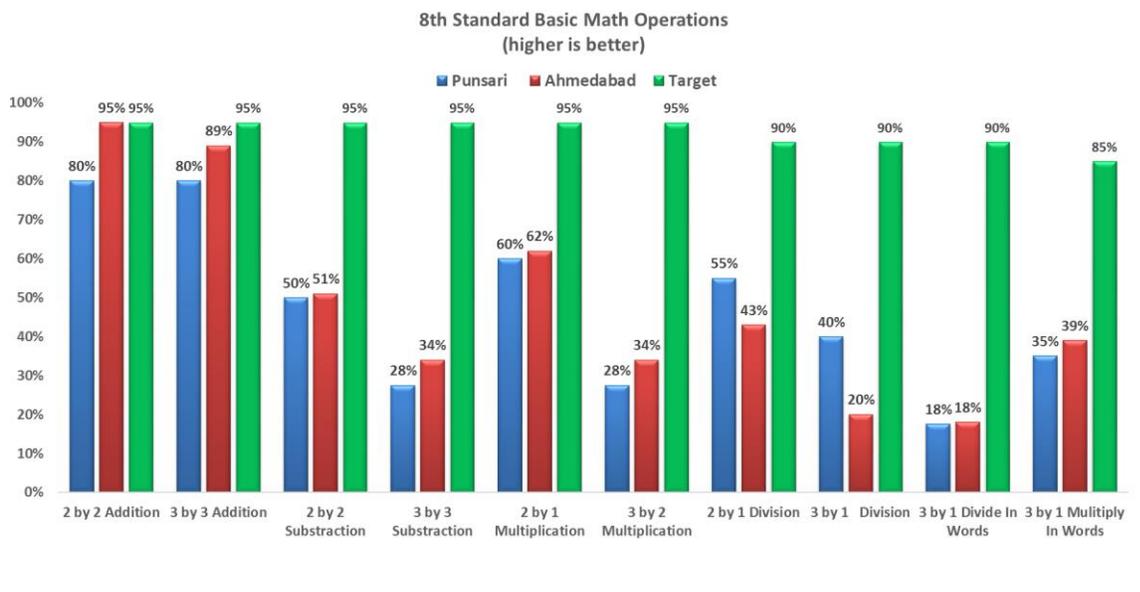
I ended up offering a workshop on soft-skill training to all college bound youth as a part of my exploration. Of the expected 15 attendees only 4 boys showed some interest. The rest did not care to even collect free material I distributed. I found almost all girls to be shy and unwilling to discuss their interests or issues. I ended up drastically scaling back my project scope and focused strictly on primary education.



Fifth Grade Students who participated in learning level assessment.

My first education meeting was with 5 heads of primary schools under the Punsari Panchayat. I broached my objective of conducting learning level assessments during the meeting and this was welcomed by all. I decided to focus on 5th standard across these schools in Punsari for my assessment. The assessment tool

used was the basic ASER assessment, to gauge reading abilities and basic mathematical abilities. I assessed the children on a graded scale, from a simple story in Gujarati to paragraphs, sentence reading, words and alphabet recognition. In addition, I used Pratham's learning camp math tool for 8th standard. The assessment results were surprising and disappointing for the optimist in me. Here is brief synopsis of my findings:



Key Findings –

In the village of Punsari, 50% of 5th standard and 25% of 8th standard didn't meet the targets set for 3rd standard. A lack of reading skills was clearly evident as over a quarter of 5th graders couldn't read simple stories. The problems compounded from primary to upper primary school as only 10% of students in 8th grade understood and differentiated the properties of a rectangle or circle. This poor academic performance stems from key systematic issues such as absenteeism (>10%), high student/teacher ratio and use of valuable

teaching manpower in administrative activities. Half of the 5th standard and a quarter of the 8th standard children are below the 3rd standard level.



Eighth grade students showing off the math test!

The End

Spending six weeks in Punsari was a worthwhile experience despite my unmet expectations. The media hype of Punsari as a model village could have been avoided if one of the reporters had spent some time in the village asking the right questions beyond short interviews and listening to the development claims. For example, where are the Panchayat members doing the hard work? Are there any young leaders groomed for long-term development? What is the utilization of Wi-Fi? As seen in my learning level assessment, Punsari turns out to be an average Gujarat village. There is no upkeep of the infrastructure when property is damaged and equipment fails. There are many other villages in Gujarat which have similar or better development stories. I would have liked to see impact in neighboring villages of the “Punsari Model” such as sanitation, street light or best practices of the Panchayat. Punsari is a great success story of how a good PR can fool media. I’m left with one simple question: Who is going to continue to tell visitors the PR story when Mr. Himanshu Patel moves on?

In midst of this bad news, the silver lining was the importance of education that is widely recognized amongst parents as a key to their children’s better future. Many parents believe sending children to private schools is the answer to the poor public school education. At a grassroots level, both parents and children are hungry to get a better education and break from the generational poverty cycle. In fact, this desire for better education spurred me to find a silver bullet. But alas, there is no one such fix – there needs to be a group effort for India’s millennials to get the quality of education they deserve. From government support of infrastructure to a better quality of teachers, India needs it all. The bright young minds of India deserve our efforts. Pratham’s role for improving learning levels with teacher training certainly will make an impact but I wonder if it is just a drop in the ocean.