

# Pishangad – A Class Apart

*By Siddharth Jalan*



How would a classroom of eighteen girls, use two glasses to drink water? Probable answer - Nine girls to a glass. Reality – Seventeen girls to one glass and one girl to the other. Sounds illogical? Well, so does untouchability.

Welcome to the district of Pishangad, where untouchability is as acceptable as eating biscuits with your evening tea. The ‘upper class’ enforces it; the ‘lower class’ accepts it. It is a social structure existing out in the open. It is here that we meet our one-glass girl. *Preeti* is a simple girl, belonging to a family of sweepers, who happened to come across teachers from Pratham’s Second Chance program. These were teachers searching for students who had dropped out of school; those who were looking for a second chance. *Preeti* was one, but couldn’t comprehend the possibility of not sweeping and actually studying. The teachers had one question for her – Did she want to study?

Social stigma made it harder to convince the parents, but who can deny a girl who has made up her mind. They had only one concern – A sweeper isn’t allowed to be anything more. And maybe their concerns weren’t unfounded. From

day one, *Preeti* was ostracised as ‘that girl’. Parents were infuriated that their children were sitting on the same floor as an untouchable. It was not in accordance with their way of living. Children learn from their parents first, and that is where they learnt to not drink water from the same glass. And eventually, not even drinking from the same water-carrier as her. Something she tried to face with a toothed-smile on a bright face, devoting her time to her studies instead. But, it bothered the Pratham teachers.

As heralders of change, they felt it their duty to correct such discrimination. Their plan was simple - Make her a part of their everyday life, starting with sharing her one glass of water. The cracks in age-old beliefs took root because of their constant interaction with her. They gave her a reason to smile wider, just by sharing jokes and food. She could finally feel the need to not be on her guard. She could finally feel like she belonged. And she could finally feel that she had a chance to a different future. One in which even a sweeper could become a teacher. A herald of change for those who need it, but might be too afraid to ask for it. The community might accept her now, but what matters more is that she accepts herself. She might be afraid of maths, but thankfully nothing else.