

5 Pradnya Victim of Superstition

School had just opened for the new academic year. Pradnya Mane, studying in the 6th grade was a smart and pretty girl. I still didn't know how good she was in her studies though. We practice constructivism in our school. Accordingly, we have a different classroom for every subject. I was organizing teaching material in the language room. The 8th graders were helping me. Suddenly 5-6 students came running. "Ma'am, Pradnya is behaving very strangely." There was chaos everywhere. I and the other teachers ran following the students.

Pradnya was sitting on her knees. Her hair was loose and all over her face and she was moving her head from side to side. Her eyes were closed and her face was flushed. I sprinkled some water on her face, held her hair in my hand and patted her on her cheeks. "Calm down Pradnya, calm down," I kept repeating. She lay down without moving but clenching her teeth. In the mean while some students brought her mother to school.

Pradnya's mother was in tears. "This is what happens to my child every full moon day," she lamented. "She has been possessed by a spirit. "Now what was that? I signaled her mother not to say anything in front of Pradnya, but she went on repeating herself. After hearing her mother going on like that, Pradnya was also bound to start believing in this superstition. I raised my voice a bit and said, "Tai, there's nothing wrong with Pradnya. She is not possessed. She and Kanchan had a fight and as we ignored it, she is just trying to seek attention. "Finally her mother calmed own and took Pradnya home.

I was wondering how to deal with this situation. Pradnya had been studying in our school from 1st grade. I spoke to her classmates and teachers to find out if this had happened before. I wanted to know if there ever had been any discussion on the topic of superstition, ghosts and being possessed by spirits. The students told me that earlier that day there was a discussion on the solar system in the class. Both Pradnya and Kanchan were arguing with each other softly so that the teacher couldn't hear them. The teacher asked a question and Kanchan gave the answer which Pradnya had prepared. The teacher praised Kanchan but Pradnya felt hurt. She felt she didn't get the credit she deserved.

I thought that considering Pradnya was a very sensitive child and also got upset quickly, she must have pretended to be possessed to draw the teacher's

attention to herself. At home Pradnya continued the charade of being possessed. The students informed me that women from the neighborhood were putting haldi - kumkum on her forehead. They were asking her mother to cut a lemon and to make an offering to the spirit. I was feeling very concerned for Pradnya. "Her neck must be hurting badly," I thought. If this keeps happening, it will have a bad effect on her studies. I felt I should go and speak to her parents, but I was doubtful if they would listen to me. The only way was to involve the 'Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti (ANS)', the group of people who were working towards eradicating superstition.

I contacted Madhav Bagve, and Anil Darekar who were a part of the A.N.S. in Latur and also my friend Rukhsana Mulla who was a teacher. I informed them about the incident with Pradnya. They understood the gravity of the situation and promised to come over the next day. In class I was telling the students how superstitions can be very damaging when I saw Pradnya walking towards the class. I held her close and asked after her. She had had a bath, changed her clothes and plaited her hair neatly but the kumkum on her forehead could still be seen. I smelt something rotten and found a small cloth bag tied around her neck. It contained a lemon which had started to rot. I took it out and threw it away. Pradnya looked sheepish. I brought her inside the class and gave the other students who were staring at her, a warning look. I wanted them to keep quiet. I finished the class without mentioning the incident.

The school got over. I let the the other children leave. I then held Pradnya close. "You are such a sweet and pretty child, Pradnya! Why are you doing this? If you go on like this, your neck will get twisted, everyone in school will tease you, you will feel ashamed to step out and go to college and you will be crippled all your life." Her class teacher Arti Kamble was also there to support me. Pradnya could finally see sense in what we were saying. I called her mother to school the next day. All 6 of us teachers counseled her about the perils of superstition. We tried to understand the reason behind Pradnya's behavior.

He mother said, "We are very poor. We work as daily wage laborers. My husband is a drunkard. He beats us up regularly. He has disappeared since the last 15 days. I alone have to work, cook and look after the children." We were moved to tears hearing her plight. She had to go back to work, but we made her promise that she would come to school when people from A.N.S. came to meet us. I was beginning to understand Pradnya's behavior. The next day, people from ANS came over. Madhav Bagve and Rukhsana Mulla spoke to Pradnya's mother in

private. She confessed that because of work, as much as she would have liked to, she had little time for the children and that they mostly had to fend for themselves. They explained the situation to her and told her that because of the atmosphere at home where parents are fighting all the time, father is a drunkard and beats them up, Pradnya is under a lot of stress. "She feels neglected and thinks that if she pretends to be possessed, she would not only get your attention but also the neighbor's", they explained.

While they were counseling Pradnya's mother, the other mothers were also called to school. Madhav Bagve showed them experiments to convince them that things like spirits entering people's bodies, devils etc. don't exist. He assured them that there is nothing divine about it, but has to do with one's mental state. "Don't get entrapped into believing things these so called Babas and Gurus say. Don't become victims of superstition. It is a waste of time and money. All you get is both physical and mental suffering." They gave many examples to corroborate their theories.

The ANS activists explained it to them that if you really try to analyse why a particular thing happened, you always get an answer. After this lecture, Pradnya's mother's eyes opened. She understood that Pradnya needed love and attention. It was necessary to be firm with her and to tell her to behave herself when she claimed to be 'possessed', rather than mollycoddle her. She understood that otherwise her life would be ruined. We saw the effect almost immediately. Pradnya was neatly dressed when she came to school from then on. Her forehead was clear of the kumkum and the holy threads and talismans tied around her hands had disappeared. She also started paying attention to her studies. She started opening up to other students and teachers.

We showed one Pradnya the right way but there are many more like her we meet while teaching. A teacher has to be not only involved in a child's education but also have to be aware of their social, family and mental issues. We are proud that we Jilha parishad teachers give as much importance to this as the quality of education.

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