Kerala: How a Malappuram school on brink of closure is now among most sought after institutions

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The Government Lower Primary School, at Pookkottur in Kerala's Malappuram district.

What happens when an IAS officer, management students from a premier institute, and the local community put their heads together to save a government school from certain closure? Result: from less than 200 students in the 2015-16 academic year, the Government Lower Primary School, at Pookkottur in Kerala's Malappuram district, today has 470 students, and boasts of an airconditioned auditorium, amphitheatre, a children's park and a botanical garden,

making it the envy of private schools in the area.

Established in 1918, this lower primary school had been on the decline for over a decade, struggling as children moved out to English-medium, private schools. Like many other government schools, the Pookkottur school too would have been shut down if not for an intervention by the community, led by the school's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), in the 2015-16 academic year.

PTA president V P Salim says that they felt the need to intervene since most of the children came from poor or middle-class families who would have struggled with the high fees in private schools. "Many of the children are from families of daily wagers. We didn't want them to be deprived of free education. So we worked to ensure that the school had all facilities at par with that of any top private school. What we focused on most was to bring about an attitudinal change among parents and children."

Once they decided the school wouldn't be allowed to shut down, the PTA and the school authorities approached the government, self-governing bodies and the local MP and MLA for funds, raising Rs 1.75 crore. They also got residents, traders and clubs in the locality to invest in the school infrastructure. As the transformation became visible in the form of new buildings, smart classrooms, a library and restrooms, the local community began enrolling their children in the school.

While the infrastructure went through an overhaul, in 2015-16, the school invited Muhammed Ali Shihab, a 2011 batch IAS officer of the Nagaland cadre, for a pep talk. Shihab then shared the remarkable story of his journey from an orphanage in Malappuram to the civil services.

“The school was on the verge of closure for want of students and facilities. I was asked to deliver a speech to motivate the parents and children. Since then, I have had a lot of interactions with the local community to motivate them and to drive home the relevance of this school,” says Shihab, who later agreed to be brand ambassador for the school.

“Now, every year, I find time to visit the school and interact with parents and children. I also keep in touch with the teachers and the PTA, giving them inputs on how to turn the school into a better space for children,” he says.
In 2017-18, as part of their social development programme, management students from IIM-Kozhikode worked with students of the school to improve their communication skills. They also held classes for parents on ‘effective parenting’.

With the school now among the most sought after in the region, headmistress V N Ambika says a major factor behind the turnaround was the change in attitude of the local community. “The PTA and the school made parents and other stakeholders believe that it is their school,” she

says.

Autorickshaw driver Askar K, whose two children go to this primary school, says, “The other day, my children spoke about wanting to be IAS officers, they spoke about an academy in Mussoorie and horse riding there. It’s quite possible that they may not get there. But at least they want to do something in life.”



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