



Story of the Month: February 2010

The Brave One

Though worry creases her forehead, this 26-year-old is sanguine about her life ahead. And as an optimist, she is hopeful that her life will only get better from here.

"I remember feeling very neglected as a child," she recalls. "My father died when I was very young... I barely remember him." What she clearly remembers is how her mother had to step out of home to take up a job, leaving Chandra and her brothers to fend for themselves. "But", she adds, "even though we were only kids, we could understand that Ma was doing her best for us."

With scarcity of money a reality, Chandra's family got her married off at 17, while she was still in school. This however, did little to transform her fate. Her husband, she discovered, was an alcoholic. Stormy scenes at home became the norm and she lived in misery till her daughter was born. That was when Chandra decided to leave her husband for good and to return to her mother's.



Then on, there was no looking back for her. Bit by bit, she began to put her life together. With her family's support, she completed her graduation and she started teaching in a primary school at the same time. "My mother is the one reason I am what I am today. No matter what anybody said, she never left my side. "

Chandra taught in a primary school for about five years, which she left to work in a not-for-profit organisation in Ramnagar. Then in 2009, she joined the *Swades Ki Khoj* programme. "When I joined the programme I was very anxious. I knew I had to leave my daughter for a whole year, but again, my family supported and encouraged me to go ahead," she says.

Six months into the programme, she has begun to understand that the goal of education should be to create confident and sensitive individuals rather than focus on rote-learning and a desire for only material wealth. "At first, I was baffled with their methods. The teachers could not correct the children, let alone scold them. It seemed that there was no way of getting the kids to even listen to the teachers," says Chandra.

But half a year later, she has begun to understand that Bodh uses unconventional methods of education to encourage children to question and understand things that are thought to be outside the ambit of conventional pedagogy. Teachers are expected to be patient with children and corporal beatings, freely dispensed in schools across India, are absolutely forbidden. "A system like Bodh brings out the best in children. The kids you see there are



much more confident than others I see," she says adding, "I think I'd like to see my daughter study in just such an environment."

But the journey so far has not been easy. "When I first joined, not everybody was welcoming. In fact, on two occasions, I packed my bags to leave," she says. But six months later, the very people who had caused her so much misery have come to care for her.

And in some ways, Bodh has changed her too. Those who knew her when she first entered the programme say she has become more temperate. "The atmosphere there is generally calm and we are encouraged to be gentle in our ways. Maybe that is what the others are noticing," she says with a smile.

Meanwhile, Chandra is doing her Masters in Psychology as a private candidate from the Kumaon University, after which she wants to continue teaching. She is also interested in performing arts, especially *kathak* and theatre. At Bodh, she has started learning *kathak* herself and would like to teach her daughter too. "It gets a little lonely there after hours. If I stay on, I'll take my daughter with me. I want her to get all that I could only dream of," she says. Clearly, this young lady is ready to take up the gauntlet and to make her mark, come what may.

Chandra Joshi in conversation with Pawan Saluja