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APPROACHING RESEARCH

My Journey as a Ph.D. Scholar



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Many people thought I was unnecessarily inviting more stress and tension by attempting to do my Ph.D. at my advanced age. I was constantly reminded that I did not need to get a doctorate degree for any enhancement in my career or even recognition in my field, so why bother? Very few understood the reason I wanted to do my Ph.D. was to really become a student again. I promised myself that I would not allow this new responsibility to impinge on my work schedule or even commitment. In fact, no one in my workplace knew that I was doing my Ph.D. till the last two months before submission of my thesis. This journey of learning was therefore rather lonely but surprisingly an enjoyable one. Being a student after so many years and learning for pure learning's sake was a liberating experience. I wish that our students would get this experience of freedom and independence where they choose to study rather than being compelled to study.

I attended all the research methodology classes, sat for the term exams and began reading all the reference material that I could get my hands on. Since I have been working with children from the slums, I wanted to do my research on them. I wanted to put my 23 years of working in the field to some conclusions that I hope would help in policy making in the future. This journey was not as easy as I thought it would be. First, three guides chosen for me left the university and with that some of my options. I was first assigned a guide from Management, then Economics and

finally Public Policy. What seemed at that time an inconvenience, actually helped me to increase the depth and breadth of my learning and I am grateful for that. I was very fortunate that I eventually found Dr. Priyanca Mathur, Head and Associate Professor of CeRSSE, to guide me and that has been a joyful and invigorating learning experience.

The biggest roadblock that emerged was Covid-19. For several months I had to shift my gear into distribution of food in the slums and arrange for about 3000 people from the slums to get vaccinated. I am proud that because of all our efforts, there was no death in the slums that I have been working with and none of the 2000 children from my schools starved. When there was panic all around and the smell of death in the atmosphere, sitting and doing reference work was the last thing on my mind. But Covid-19 too, was a huge learning exercise. The theme of my research is the gap between policy and implementation and the pandemic flushed out into the open all the policies that seem so far removed from ground reality. Although I was derailed from my timelines of research by several months, and many a time even questioned whether I would ever be able to complete it with having contracted Covid three times, my realisation that I was on the right track of research got even further fortified.

Without wasting any time as soon as the lockdown was lifted, I started my fieldwork. It was not easy as all the schools were closed indefinitely. While it was easy for me to get the Parikrama schools opened and children of the age segment to come to school for the survey, it was not so easy with the other schools. Comparisons of learning outcomes of children from the slums with privileged children were the crux of my research. I had to therefore request government officials to open the government schools just for my research. Getting the children of high-end schools to come and answer the questionnaires physically and participate in the group discussions was even more difficult. I had to give written guarantees, have health officials over to supervise, take permission from the parents and a whole protocol had to be adhered to. The parents of privileged schools wanted their children to participate in an online session but that is not what I wanted and I had to stick to my ground. This difference of attitude of the parents of poor children as compared to privileged children was heart-breaking but a learning as well. It became even more obvious how uncared for, and neglected the children going to government schools are. And that is all that my research is all about.

Once the fieldwork was done, then began the grind of decoding the information and getting into analysis. This is a very tedious job and for someone who is far removed from sitting in front of the computer and rolling out numbers, it was sometimes back-

breaking. But my guide Priyanca Ma'am kept reminding me that this was the core of my research and all the reference study I had done was of no use if I could not arrive at a hypothesis of my own and did not substantiate it with data. I have to confess that there were times when I felt like seeking help to crunch the data. But then I told myself that if I had started doing my Ph.D. to learn new things then this was also something that I had to plod through. I am so happy that I could reach the finishing line of this task and the results were satisfying and aligned with my hypothesis. Then of course began the edits, numbering and paging of the written text. That was not a happy task either but a very important one. I began to realise the importance of commas, full stops and capital letters all the time. I even dreamt of it for several nights!

I submitted my thesis last month, just one day before my last date! This was especially significant for me because on the day of my submission, I celebrated my mother's 96th birthday and I could present my thesis as a birthday gift to her. I am so grateful that Priyanca Ma'am travelled with me through the process and kept me from falling off. Now I await to defend my thesis with baited breath. Taking the Slum out of the Child is the title of my thesis.