

## **Roshni Vishkarma**

Roshini is a 16 year old girl who belong to the Agariya tribe whose traditional occupations are iron smelting and mining with hunting and collecting forest produce being their subsidiary occupations. Children begin working with their parents at an early age and literacy amounts to only 10% with preference given to boys to study.

Roshini's determination and perseverance to study sets her apart from most other girls who succumb to their fate of being a girl and an Agariya. Her journey has not been easy and she's still continuing to fight the social norms of her community.

She was born and brought up in Bhopal, her parents' hometown, and is the eldest of 3 brothers and 2 sisters. Her mother cuts grass at Van Vihar and her father works in construction to support the family. Roshini has been studying intermittently at Muskaan for the past 11 years while all her younger siblings who are between the ages of 5 and 15, have been regular at Muskaan only for the past 2 years. Prior to Muskaan, none of her siblings attended any form of schooling and neither did they work.

"As a child, I used to often miss school whenever my mother would take me along to work especially when it was the season to cut grass. I attended a government school for 4 years but when we relocated to Barkhedi I had to stop schooling. I never liked the government school. I was always beaten by the teacher for not completing my homework or making a mistake. I wish my teacher understood I couldn't do the homework as it was too difficult and there was nobody who could help me at home. I would often run away from the school too because I didn't like it."

It has been a constant battle for Roshini to keep herself in some form of schooling as her community constantly pressures her parents to adhere to social norms of keeping girls at home, away from any influences of the outside world. Every now and then, the pressure takes a toll on her parents and they put a stop her schooling. Roshini then has to spend all her energy reassuring her parents she wants to go to school only to study and not to meet boys. Over the years, she has mastered the art of convincing her parents and has realised the trick is to obtain approval to study only for short periods of time.

"I always tell them just another few months or for a year. When the year is over, I extend it by another year. This is how I've managed to get this far."

With child marriage being a social norm in her tribe, Roshini too was married off as a child to a boy from her village but has not been given away to him yet.

"I know of him from my village but we are not allowed to communicate with each other. Someday I will be sent to his house as his wife but I'm fortunate my parents have agreed to give me away only in a few years. It used to be the norm to be sent away to your in-laws place as soon as you were married but these days we are able to coax our parents to delay it until we are older.

“I dislike the fact I was married off as a child without my consent. I don’t understand how society expects me to honour a child marriage or even take it seriously. I don’t know anything about the person I married. In my community, a marriage cannot be annulled by the couple. Only if the families have the right to annul it. On my own, I can’t do anything about it.”

Even her younger brother, Arwin, who is only 10 years old is a married himself though his wife has not been sent to him yet. The rest of her 4 siblings’ partners were selected and finalised through formal engagements when they were very young.

Only 5 girls from her village go to school including Roshini and her 2 sisters. The community’s beliefs about girls using school as an excuse for mischief and tarnishing the family’s name is still very prevalent. Parents who have daughters live in the constant fear their daughters, if allowed out of the house, will most likely elope with a man.

“My relatives keep telling our parents to send us to our in-laws before we do something silly and shame the family. I don’t want to go to my in-laws because as long as I am living with my parents, my in-laws can’t prohibit me from studying or say anything to me.

“Some girls in the village are envious of us girls who go to school and wish they had the same opportunity but there are also many who believe we are loafers and up to no good because we’re just using school as an excuse for mischief.

“It’s been a tiring battle trying to constantly reassure my parents we’re in school only to study and not to be mischievous with boys. I keep reminding my parents it’s better to study than to sit by the stove all day. We don’t want to repeat their cycle of illiteracy and want a life which is different from theirs. We used to feel so ashamed telling people we do not go to school.

“The community’s perception on what a girl does outside the house is very difficult to break. The panchayat is constantly on our case and never lets go of an opportunity to tell my parents they are making a huge mistake by allowing the girls to study. My parents then get upset by these remarks and put a stop to our schooling for weeks or months. I then work on it again and slowly convince them to allow me to go back and study for just a little longer. Even being seen walking home from school when one has missed the school van is grounds to be pulled out of school and so is being seen out with friends even though we have informed our parents. People from our community will give us disapproving stares and trouble our parents for letting their daughters out.”

Roshini recalls an incident when a boy and girl from her village eloped. This terrified her parents who put an abrupt end to her schooling for fear she might do the same.

“It took me an entire year to persuade my parents to send me back to school again. This constant battle of having to fight for a right to study has been draining and difficult. But I have been very persistent. I never give up even if it means a whole year of trying to change someone’s mind.”

Families not only discourage their daughters from studying but many prohibit their sons too as they rather their sons work and bring in a steady income as they don't see the value in education.

"Of course they are boys who are not interested in studying and would rather work. My husband has never been to school and works in a shop. I feel life with an educated husband will be better because he'll be able to get a good job and earn better. I'm hoping my husband though uneducated will be open-minded and supportive of my desire to keep studying. If he's conservative and narrow-minded then we will have a lot of problems. I really don't know what things will be like for me. If my husband is a nice person, I will stay with him. If he's an alcoholic or abuses drugs then I will tell him I can't stay with him."

Roshini hopes she can bring about significant changes in her community upon completion of her studies. She wants to address the issue of child marriages so that girls have the freedom to move around without any pressure from their parents or in-laws.

"I hope my education will allow me to make these changes. If my parents allow me to continue studying, I will become a lawyer and help fight cases for those who have been denied justice."

Roshini knows it's very unlikely her in-laws will allow her to continue studying once she starts to live with them. Though she will try to persuade them, if they refuse she won't go against them and will give up her studies.

"I'm hesitant to bring up the subject with them now since they can turn around and blame my education for my outspoken behaviour and they will raise questions about what I do when I go to school. I don't want to do anything which may jeopardise my opportunity to study now. I will deal with my in-laws when the time comes.

"Sometimes I wish I were a boy so that I could work and help my father. My brothers are very young right now and as a girl, I am not allowed to work outside the house. They tell me girls can only do housework but not take up a job outside. I hope I can prove them wrong once I am a lawyer."