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Book Review

A Doctor's Experiments in Bihar

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“A Doctor's Experiments in Bihar” by Dr. Taru Jindal, is one of the most inspiring books that I have read. A real-life story of social transformation in a system that everyone believed to be broken beyond repair, is basically a book of hope in humanity. It starts with a quote by Margaret Mead - “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Written in the style of a memoir; this book documents her experience of working in neglected areas of Bihar in maternal and child healthcare.

Dr. Jindal is a gynecologist trained comfortably in the city of Mumbai, and she wished to work at a place where the need was the greatest. With that thought, she went to a neglected district hospital in Motihari, Bihar, as part of an NGO which was working on revitalising the maternal child health systems in Bihar. One of the things that I liked about this book is the way she candidly talks about starting her journey into service in these areas as someone naive, yet she goes anyway and learns so much on the way, “As I look back at that meeting now, I realise how naive I was. I did not know what ‘public health’ meant. The mindset required for it; what works in it, what doesn't. All I knew was that I could operate, deliver babies and that I really, really wanted to serve in areas which needed me more than Mumbai did. I was ready to be a student and learn along the way.” We all begin at some point.

The book starts with a description of the horror of her first day in the hospital, watching women deliver in unbelievable circumstances. This makes her remember all the discouragement people had for her whenever they heard she was going to Motihari, Bihar. But she fights hard against the pessimism.

“I had been told it was one of the most ‘resistant’ cases, it was a hospital people had given up on. But I could not afford to start my journey there with that kind of a cynical attitude. If I did that, I would have surrendered even before the battle had begun. It was a seemingly impossible task of infusing functionality into a system with the help of the very people who had contributed to its dysfunctionality.”

It was tempting to be horrified, judge and leave. But, she realises, “It was always easy to be the ‘activist’ who points fingers, but much harder to take charge and fix a broken system.” From there, her journey begins, as she moves from outrage to constructive action. This is the challenging, but beautiful journey of trying to fix the system instead of just noticing the problems, working *with* the people within the system.

However, it was a challenging task as a youth to get people much older than her to listen. As she made failing attempts to change things, it did seem there wasn't much hope for the place. But even as she contemplated leaving, one of her favorite quotes by Edward Everett Hale came to her mind, that I would wish to remember all my life: "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; And just because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can."

As the book progresses, Dr. Jindal talks about the dilemmas and challenges that presented themselves to her, and how she dealt with them, her thought process and the things she learnt, as she struggled to change *something*. She talks about the necessity she felt of working with those within the system. Initially, she just started to get to know and talk with everyone, because everyone was a prospective stakeholder in her plans for change. She started to notice the gross violations that the staff, too, had, which made them unwilling to work for the patients. Due to her perseverance and passion for the work, she found allies, who were willing to work with her, starting with a single motivated nurse. Gradually more people got infected by the desire to change. Some people require less effort to convince, some more, while some did not get convinced until the end of her posting.

There are new insights to be gained in other areas, too, especially about just how much the burden of preventable maternal and child mortality and morbidity was in certain areas. We often forget about the basic issues that the most neglected areas of the world face. "While the Western world is screaming itself hoarse over 'pro-choice' and 'pro-life'; a vast majority of our population has no choice in the matter of life." She sees the effect the lack of appreciation can have on a person who is putting in effort.

As her allies' increase, she suddenly gets a new ally in the form of a new District Magistrate. And that becomes a game changer. When people in power choose to take up the right cause, miracles can happen. Slowly, but surely, rules are enforced, things start to change. And then, all of a sudden, Dr. Jindal is asked to help in upgrading the PHCs as well. She starts teaching and training in earnest, molding her teachings at every point to local inclinations.

"I also realised that it is not systems which work, it is people who do. It is not systems which fail, it is the people. So, to make the systems work, we must focus on influencing people - through improvement of work environments, emotional and technical support and through appropriate use of authority and rules."

Some months later, the unbelievable happened; Motihari District Hospital was awarded the first prize for being the best District Hospital of Bihar.

Dr. Jindal's posting in that hospital was over, but in Part II of the book, she returns to the region in Nepal, to provide the disaster aid after the 2015 earthquake struck, and was amazed to see the resilience, the dedication of the nurses and others. Even though highly qualified manpower was scarce, healthcare workers were very well trained, and the health system allowed bright minds to climb up the ladder, getting more and more training.

Following this experience she again proceeds to join work in a village in Bihar. She encounters the near-purdah system that women still face in some regions in our country, as well as caste discrimination. "Patna, to their minds, was as far away as Delhi or Mumbai." She sees the innumerable unqualified quacks misusing antibiotics rampantly. She sees the huge problem of malnutrition. She tries to start a project of community farming in the village in the hope of tackling malnutrition and bringing together some unity.

“Who decided my limits as a doctor? Did my being a doctor mean that I had to stop at prescribing medicines and performing surgeries?... We must always attempt change. In our hesitation and doubt, we never move beyond expressing our emotions for problems.”

She starts to move beyond her speciality. She treats children and holds adolescent education sessions. Yet tremendous challenges are still left to be tackled. Cynicism becomes her bane. People couldn't believe that anyone can volunteer for such work out of choice. From facing the suspicion of inspectors and even the villagers, to getting blamed by some patients even when everything was done right, maintaining motivation was difficult many a time. Yet she persists, as she sees the gains, the changes made, even in the midst of the cynicism.

“I realized that my time in Bihar, far from making me hopeless, had filled me with hope... Change was not just possible, it was inevitable... Another reason for optimism was that it was the people from within the system that had made this possible... Every single time there had been a few people from within the system who had cooperated and taken this struggle forward.”

However, by the time Dr Jindal was writing the book, she had to discontinue her work in Bihar. She was diagnosed with a brain tumour and wrote the book as she went through the cycles of chemotherapy. As she was advised to avoid her heavy work in Bihar, she started working as a Lactation Consultant instead, another issue she is passionate about.

“I realized, if life takes away one canvas, it gives you another to paint... I think I am fortunate to have the kind of satisfaction at thirty-six - of having contributed, of having made this world a slightly better place, of having influenced its architecture positively.”

In conclusion, I would say this is a book about a woman attempting social transformation, in a system that everyone had given up on. The overarching theme is of hope.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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