

The Day the Earth Shifted



Premlata Rai has been a teacher with Pratham for four years now. Enjoying the playfulness of younger children, she has run a balwadi for the toddlers of 'Khadi No. 3' - a small slum community on the slopes of and at the foothills of a small hillock in Ghatkopar. This year, she also opened an SSA class (bridge class for out of school children), with an aim to mainstream the children into school after sufficient preparation.

It was in this regard - to enroll two of her students in the nearby Mohili village BMC school - that Premlata had left the house that grey morning, on July 26. When she got back that afternoon, it was raining heavily, and the water was knee deep outside her home. She looked up at the

dark clouds that seemed to hang low over the hillock at the foot of which she lived, shivered, and went in to cook lunch for her family.

At about 2:55 the electricity failed, and hearing her mother call, she went out to see what the matter was. There was pandemonium everywhere, as people left their homes and fled, staring up at the hill. Landslide - everybody's nightmare. "We have to clear out NOW," someone told her. "The hill is coming down." Just then she heard the wails of a frightened child coming from the house directly in front of hers. Fighting off her terrified mother, who tried to stop her, she hurried to the aid of the child. The parents seemed to be out, and had locked the door.



Desperation giving her strength, she managed to break open the door, to find 7-year-old Sudha, and 10-year-old Ajay trembling in the room. A scene of utter devastation greeted her when she opened the door to the kitchen behind - there was no room! Half covered in mud, a frightened 6-year-old

(Vivek) cowered in a corner, too afraid to move. A big boulder had fallen on their home, causing the wall to fall in, miraculously missing the child. She coaxed him out of the house, and took the children to the safety of her own. "He clung onto me, he was so frightened - he would not let go," Premlata recounts later.



But she had heard screams from the next house. As her daughter darted out once more, her mother pleaded with her not to. "You will die," she wept. "Forget about me - if I don't go, all those children will die!" Premlata answered furiously, as she went out to the children obviously trapped there. Inside was a woman with three children. The wall had fallen in, and the woman was injured, bleeding from the head, and very disoriented. Sameer (4 years old), and the baby Khushi (1 year old) came out with their mother. But 6-year-old Rukaiyya, too scared

to move, whimpered in the back room, which Premlata knew must be absolutely demolished. When she went in to get Rukaiyya, she saw that the mudslide had brought down what had been another hut on the slopes, and a child - a young girl - was buried chest deep in the rubble, pinned by a great boulder. Premlata called out for help, fearing that she would not be able to shift the great rock, but none came. All had fled. Desperate, she applied all her might to heave the stone, and freed the girl - only to discover 7 more children along with their mother in a small cavity beyond. It had been their home, and an instant later, would have been their tomb if Premlata had not managed to free the young girl. The family was injured, bleeding and very, very scared.



But the nightmare was far from over. Yet again, Premlata heard screams, and found another young girl buried waist deep, hysterically crying out for someone to save her four little sisters buried in the rubble. Farhad Sheikh was also a Pratham teacher, a friend of Premlata's. As she went to rescue her friend, her blood ran cold. Farhad had lived with her parents and five younger siblings high on the slope of the hillock. Now, she was buried waist deep at the foot, what had been her home a few feet away, and buried. It was all the exhausted Premlata could do to, to pull Farhad out. But she was not able to rescue her sisters, who perished in the slide...

Premlata's mother tended to the wounds, and her father took the more seriously injured children to the nearby doctor. All were given dry clothes to wear. Premlata's family did not move away, and sheltered all whom they had rescued. The youngest to escape the calamity was a 6 month old baby girl, who fell from one of the hutments on the hill, and was miraculously saved unhurt, even as her family did not make it. she

was also brought to Premlata's house by the community dwellers, and was looked after by the family till the baby's relatives were traced from a nearby community and came to get her.

That fateful day, the hill shifted 3 times. Almost all the 200 odd families living on the slopes perished. Almost all the children in those homes died.



If it wasn't for Premlata Rai, the toll would have included 16 more.