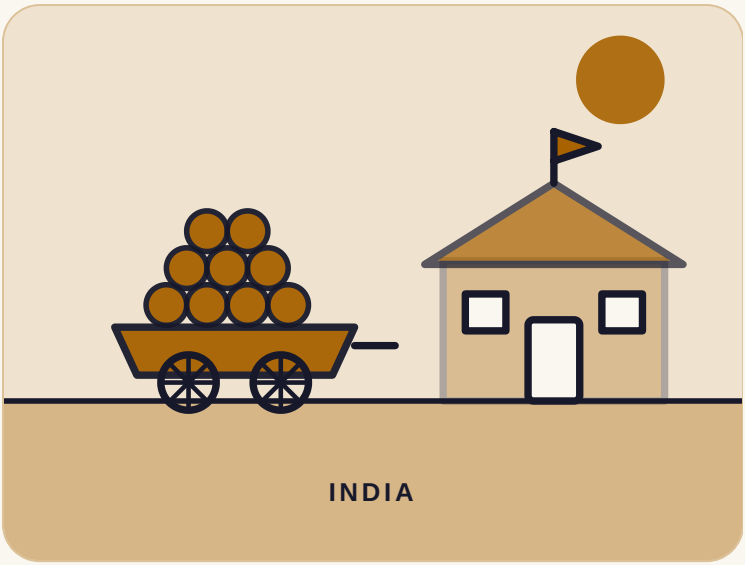

INDIA

The orange seller who built a school

A fruit seller in Karnataka with no formal education built a school for his village, one saving at a time.

WHERE	Mangaluru
WHO	Harekala Hajabba, an orange seller in Mangaluru, Karnataka
WHEN	1990 to 2021

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Harekala Hajabba sold oranges on the streets of Mangaluru, a city in Karnataka, India. He had no formal education. He grew up poor, and he knew only two local languages, Tulu and Beary.

In 1990, at the bus depot where he sold oranges, a foreigner asked him the price of an orange. Hajabba could not understand the question.

> **I wanted children of my village to study.**
>
> HAREKALA HAJABBA, TO THEPRINT

A school, step by step

His village, Newpadpu, had no school. The nearest one was 7 km away. For two years, Hajabba asked local leaders for help, and he saved some of his earnings. Deccan Herald says he put aside about ₹150 a day.

In 2000, a local politician set up a classroom for 28 children in a mosque's school building. A charity provided the first teacher. Hajabba swept the rooms and boiled drinking water for the children.

Then he bought land with his savings and help from donors. He gave it to the government for a proper school. A building opened in 2001, with classes 1 to 5.

28	7 km	2012
children in the first classroom, in 2000	distance to the nearest school before it	year the high school building opened

The school kept growing. Class 6 began in 2005. By 2010, its first class 10 students sat their school-leaving exams. Hajabba bought more land, and a high school building opened in 2012.

Not my award

In 2020, India named Hajabba for the Padma Shri, one of its highest honours. He received it in November 2021. He walked up to receive it barefoot.

He would not take the credit. “This is not my award. This is for the school,” he said. He said hundreds of kind donors and the government made it possible.

People now call him ‘Akshara Santha’, the saint of letters. His life story is part of the courses at three universities, Deccan Herald says.

Even then, he asked for more. Many children stop after class 10, because the next school is far away. Hajabba hopes for a college in Harekala for older students.

How it unfolded

- **1990** A foreigner asks the price of an orange. Hajabba cannot understand.
- **2000** A first classroom opens for 28 children in a mosque's school building.
- **2001** A school building opens for classes 1 to 5.
- **2012** A high school building opens.
- **2021** Hajabba receives the Padma Shri, named in 2020.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

A moment of embarrassment became a school because one man refused to forget it.

Hajabba did not do it alone, and he said so himself. That may be why so many people helped.

OUR TAKE

Small, steady savings and a clear purpose can build something large.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1

Turn shame into purpose

The question he could not answer led him to build a school.

Try this: When something hurts, ask what you can build from it.

2 Save a little, steadily

He set aside part of his small earnings for years.

Try this: Regular small savings can fund a big goal.

3 Ask many people for help

Donors, a politician, a charity and the government all helped.

Try this: Ask for help, and share the credit.

4 Keep widening the goal

He went from one classroom to a high school, and now asks for a college.

Try this: When one goal is done, look for the next step.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A school can begin with one person who refuses to forget a question.

Sources

ThePrint
For Harekala Hajabba, journey from orange cart to Padma Shri began with a foreigner's question

Deccan Herald
As Hajabba receives Padma Shri, kids rejoice at his school

The News Minute
Harekala Hajabba, Karnataka fruit seller who started school, receives Padma Shri

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on dates and details. The foreigner's question: ThePrint dates it to 1990, at the bus depot ("31 years ago" in 2021); The Better India says "about two decades ago" and says a couple of tourists asked in English; Wikipedia says only "many years ago" and a foreign tourist asking in English; the story uses ThePrint's 1990 and says only "a foreigner", and does not state the language. His schooling: ThePrint, The News Minute and The Better India say he had no formal education; Wikipedia says he dropped out of school early; the story says no formal education. When the school began: Deccan Herald says he built a school in 1999; ThePrint gives 17 June 2000 as the day the first classroom opened in the madrassa building of a mosque, set up by the local MLA (state legislator) for 28 students, with the first teacher from the Dharmasthala Rural Development Project; the story uses 2000 and 28 children, which Deccan Herald also gives for the school's start. The 7 km distance, the two years of asking leaders, the 2001 building for classes 1 to 5, class 6 in 2005, the first class 10 students in 2010, the extra land and the high school building inaugurated on 14 June 2012 (headmaster Laxman Puduval) are from ThePrint. The News Minute says a government higher primary school was created at Newpadupu in 2008 and that Hajabba swept the premises and boiled water for the children; the 2008 date does not match ThePrint's timeline, so the story does not use it. Savings: Deccan Herald calls them "meagre savings of Rs 150 per day"; ThePrint says he saved up whatever he could; it is not clear whether the ₹150 is his daily income or his daily savings, so the story says "put aside about ₹150 a day" and attributes it. Hajabba's quote and "This is not my award. This is for the school" are from ThePrint; the barefoot walk is from Deccan Herald and ThePrint. The Padma Shri was announced in January 2020 and presented on 8 November 2021 (The News Minute, Deccan Herald); the story does not give a reason for the delay. His request for a college in Harekala is from Deccan Herald; that many children stop after class 10 because higher institutes are in the city is from The News Minute. Deccan Herald also says his life story is in the syllabus of three universities (Davangere, Kuvempu and Mangalore) and that he is popularly known as 'Akshara Santha', the saint of alphabets; the story uses both and attributes the first. YourStory could not be opened (403). The pin shows Mangaluru. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.