Transforming Little Lives

Stories of Hope from Gurugram's Migrant Slums

Around 800 tin sheds comprise this slum opposite Jalvayu Towers in Sector 56, Gurugram

CHETNA's intervention in the slums of Gurugram—in partnership with Device Book Online Services Pvt. Ltd.—has resulted in the gradual but tangible metamorphosis of the children inhabiting these areas. Often forced into paid work, rag picking and begging or resigned to domesticity; these vulnerable children have now been mentored by a team of dedicated workers, interacting within communities to compassionately address the need for knowledge amongst the nation's precious young minds. These efforts have resulted in tales of perseverance that reflect the unfit environments children grow up in, but also their ability to emerge victorious as the first generation of learners in their families—in spite of the circumstances they are born into.

CHETNA

Childhood Enhancement Through Training and Action

Ignorance; no bliss?

Opposite the posh Jalvayu Towers in Sector 54, Gurugram, lies an expansive slum inhabited entirely by Bengali speaking migrants. Here, a community has organically developed over the past decade or so, sheltered by around 800 odd tin sheds lining identical lanes. A stroll in this metal foil landscape feels like a quest through some decrepit labyrinth. There are no sharp edges, and no apparent centre, but there is an established flow of life here. Pooja, the CHETNA educator in this area, describes the community's origins— "They're all Bengalis. They speak Bengali at home, so it is a big thing for the kids to learn and speak Hindi as well as they now do. Some kids here work as ragpickers, out of their own will or because their parents force them to.The kids are discouraged from studying because the parents think 'What will kids do with education?' They don't get children admitted to school because they say they're here only for 3-4 months, and they want the kids to study in their native tongue in Bengal. But they don't get to know when those months turn into 3-4 years. Recently, I've gotten 23 kids admitted to school."

Initially, when Pooja would interact with parents in the community, she was faced with ignorance, "Their question to me was 'What will we get in return?' They don't see the value of education." To counter this, CHETNA's workers spread awareness about the benefits of education through a daily outreach activity, in order to convince parents to allow their kids to be enrolled in primary school, which tends to unveil more specific concerns, "Parents do not wish to take responsibility for the child's education. Every child here does housework or takes care of younger siblings, because of which they can't go to school. If someone tells the parents that they will be paid ₹1000 a month to send their kids to school, every child here will be sent everyday," she laughs.

The Perils of Migration

Since September 2017, CHETNA's operations in Gurugram have included identifying children aged seven to 13 who are in need of direct or indirect intervention for basic education, followed by community outreach and providing knowledge in core subjects such as Hindi, English and Mathematics; until children are eligible for formal education. Project coordinator Mr. Vijay Kumar explains, "We divide the children into 3 levels based on their ability to read and write. First, we do an assessment and then bring them up to a standard sufficient to enrol them in school. We record the progress of every child." We skim through elaborate files, each dedicated to a child who has been engaged, documenting every milestone in their learning journey—each file, a souvenir of metamorphosis.

In a reflective tin shed at the periphery of the slum, 60 students trickle in and out everyday from morning to evening. Posters defining vegetables, fruits and flower species are plastered on the four walls surrounding the kids, who enthusiastically recite the alphabet and a string of nursery rhymes in chorus, one sultry afternoon in May. One among these voices is 13 year old Ashfaq*, whose mother works as a domestic help, and father can apparently "drive any car, even a car without a steering wheel!" He speaks with a playful sincerity, "I'm in class two. My brother studies in the village, in Howrah. My sister has studied till class nine. It's just been a week since I started going to school." Pooja intervenes, "He has been coming to the centre since February, but didn't come regularly earlier. For the past month he's been regular. I got his admission done after teaching him the basics." Ashfaq grins and offers his defence for skipping classes, "I used to be a conductor in

the Sector 55 bus. I did it for one year, because my mother told me to. The bus owner asked me to do *conductry* one day, so I told my mother and she spoke to him. I earned ₹200 everyday, from 10 AM to 7 PM. I liked the work, but after I started studying, my mother told me to leave it and focus on learning. I left work as soon as I got admission." Now, Ashfaq's day starts at 6 AM. He goes to school everyday and returns to this centre in the afternoon, after which he helps around the house—"I go to fill water at the tank. I make the beds and sweep at home everyday." Pooja mentions that one of his friends is still working as a conductor. Ashfaq cuts in, "No, he's left work now, but he does drugs. He tells me to do it too, but I stay away from him." Despite these persistent distractions, Ashfaq remains determined in his efforts, simply because,"I like studying. Studies are important to become something in life." He remarks casually that he'd like to be a teacher when he grows up, which prompts a giggle from Pooja, "Yes, and then Ashfaq will be the one going out to recruit children." Vijay later informs me that until a month ago, Ashfaq had also been rag picking near the slum and begging in the evenings at the nearby *Mor* market. His choices, or the choices made for him, have so far been defined by work, dictated by money. Will it be easy to accustom himself to the routine of academic life? For now, Ashfaq has already returned to perfecting his spellings. It seems, he is fairly well-tuned to this new rhythm.

Zeeshan*, a friend of Ashfaq's, who has been listening to him speak, explains an obstacle in learning that is common to many other children here, "I'm in class two now. I studied in class three earlier, in the same school. But then we shifted to another place because my mom had started working there. I used to wash cars where she worked. For two years, I didn't study. I started school again last Friday." Zeeshan was also given basic education at this centre for a couple of months prior to his admission. Like Ashfaq, and most other boys in the area, he too contributes to household chores—"like cooking, cleaning, getting water." It is interesting that most of them don't consider this to be 'work', much like some kids here whose mothers are homemakers comment dismissively the she "does nothing" at home.

"I left work as soon as I got admission."

ASHFAQ, 13

For many children living in the area, the uncertainty that accompanies urbanisation signals an abandonment of any academic endeavours they might have been keen to accomplish. Similar to Ashfaq's predicament, these children are often forced to renounce education to accommodate the perils of migration. If and when they do resume schooling after a few months or years, they must first fill in the inconsistent gaps of knowledge. This becomes a function of CHETNA's operations as well.

13 year old Sanya* shares, “I’ve studied till 5th standard in my village school, then we came to the city. Here, I’m in class four. Studying is easier here. I’ve been going to school since January, everyday. Earlier, I used to be at home all day, doing housework. One day ma’am came home and then I started coming here. Ma’am teaches us well. I still cook food if my mother isn’t at home, or go to fetch water.” How’s she liking school? “At school there’s a lot of studying, playing, and you make many friends. My parents tell me to study well. They say, ‘become a doctor when you grow up.’” Indeed, the sky is the limit—and we can see a fragment of it through a gap in the tin roof overhead.

Veena*, a year younger than Sanya, was born and brought up in the city, but still had to drop out of school when her family moved homes. “I’m in class three. I started going to school one week ago. My younger brother is in first grade. My father is in the village, and my mother works in houses. I used to go to another school till second grade, then I left it because we shifted here. I didn't go to school for one year. Now, I want to study further.” Other kids are not engaged as quickly as Veena was, explains Pooja, “Some kids have dropped out of school five years ago. They forget everything they’ve learnt. It’s acceptable for an eight or nine year old child to be in class two, but seeing 11 or 12 year olds in second grade is disheartening. Ideally, a child should have passed tenth grade by the time they are 15 or 16 years old.”

All the students here seem to be engaged in household chores, owing to the fact that their parents work erratic hours and cannot be present at home to clean or cook. Rega* (aged 11) offers her take on the matter quite simply, “I like working at home, because I’ve liked it since childhood.” Currently in third grade, Rega has been regularly attending school for almost five months—“We go to school early, to learn karate in the morning. Some kids hit others, so we have to defend ourselves. The only problem is, it takes half an hour to walk to school. It’s far.” Sanya, who also takes karate lessons, agrees. She finds it particularly difficult to walk back home in the afternoon heat. Most of the students walk to school together, Pooja says, “if more students went regularly, we could arrange for a vehicle. But currently, not enough of them go every single day.” As we talk, Rega extracts a photo of her standing with many kids in orange t-shirts, and a few seated adults, against a white wall. “She went to Dumduma recently, with CHETNA,” says Pooja, who is also in the photo. Rega speaks descriptively about her trip to Dumduma, a district in Haryana where CHETNA had recently organised a residential retreat for kids from across Delhi, “We used to have meetings everyday, where we spoke about our rights and dreams. Then we drank tea and ate and played in the evening.” She goes on to elaborate on ‘Badhte Kadam’ (Growing Steps—an initiative by CHETNA), reciting from memory, “It is an organisation of street and working children. It was founded in 2002. It started with 35 kids, now there are 12,000. I am a member too. They teach us about what rights kids have, like the right to study, to wear clean clothes, eat good food, to participate, live freely…” At this point, she fidgets before admitting sheepishly, “I’m forgetting the rest.” We go back to discussing her love for studying—“Since childhood, I used to see kids going to school and feel very happy. I though I should also study. Studying is helpful for whatever you want to be when you grow up.” And what might that be? She looks at Sanya and Veena before declaring, “Here, only the three of us want to be doctors. Doctors take money and then treat patients, but I will treat them first and then accept money.” Are Sanya and Veena also motivated by philanthropy? “I want to be a doctor because there are no doctors in my family,” says Sanya; while Veena offers a more pragmatic reason, “You

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VEENA, 12

can heal people, and earn money as well." In these cases, the most potent benefit of education has been to expose the child's own potential to them, as well as to those around them.

Stakeholder Support

CHETNA's role under this project is not limited to teaching children and counselling parents, but also includes interaction with various stakeholders. Today, Vijay has met with the principal of the primary school most of the kids in the *juggi* (slum) attend. "He insists on seeing an identity proof before granting admission. His intention is correct. Having an Aadhaar card will make it easier for him to create bank accounts for the children. It falls within his duties to open joint accounts for the parents and kids. However, under the Right To Education, there is no need for an ID proof to enrol a child in school. Say you find a child at a railway station who has no identity documents, you can still get him admitted to a school—provided he says 'I want to study.'"

The *juggi* was settled roughly eight or nine years ago, on government owned land which is currently maintained by the local land mafia. Says Vijay, "They collect ₹1500 to ₹2000 from the slum dwellers every month. They have built and rebuilt the slum. They also provide electricity and water supply. Recently, their head inaugurated a convent school nearby. I went to meet him there, and I told him 'You've built a great school here, you should build a tin shed for our kids too', so he funded the tin shed the kids study in. Then I said 'Your school has full AC, you can at least install a cooler in our shed', so he got that installed too! He too is a stakeholder in the community." This is the nature of collaboration that grassroots organisations like CHETNA must depend on to thrive in an ecosystem where the means must be customised, justifiably, to achieve a noble end.

The Bravehearts of Badshahpur

A short distance away at Badshahpur, an afternoon class is being conducted for some among the 60 kids who are regularly engaged at this centre. In the courtyard of a small temple, children have gathered after school hours, facing a makeshift chalkboard. The two locations targeted in Gurugram were chosen after a thorough survey of the areas where CHETNA's intervention was required. These centres serve as meeting grounds for the most vulnerable children in these areas to learn and interact. At Badshahpur, there exist roughly 400 homes within the slums, populated largely by migrants from Bihar and Bengal. Some unique challenges threaten the education and safety of children here, as I come to learn through a conversation with Nargis*.

Nargis doesn't know her age, but seems no older than eight years. As I interact with older kids, Nargis repeatedly sneaks up behind us to giggle and demand that I ask her some questions too. So, I oblige. “I want to go to school, but my father isn’t giving the documents. He says, ‘You will not go to school. You have to take care of your brother.’” Nargis has an infant brother at home, and her mother is a homemaker. Her father works as a musician, but not regularly, “He plays dholak (drum), when people call him.” At an age when she should be the one being cared for, she is burdened with the tasks of an entire household. “First I wash the utensils, then sweep the floor, and then I wash the clothes of my mother, brother, and sisters. My father doesn’t let me wash his clothes. I bathe my younger sister, then I go to fill water.” I ask how a child as small as her can carry a bucket of water back home, “I’m tiny, I carry a small bucket.” She continues, “Sir has said to come here at 2 PM everyday, so I study here. I like sir, because he teaches us. I eat food once, at 4 PM. The utensils I eat in, I also wash.” She had informed Vijay earlier that her father tried to hurt her the night before. When this is brought up, she says blankly, “Yesterday, my father hit me. He used to hit my mother earlier.” Vijay decides to meet her father this evening. However, as we’re talking, a tall and slender man ambles into the temple gates and stands over us. He interrupts our conversation to ask, “Your mother is sick at home. Why have you come to study?” As soon as he arrives, Nargis’s demeanour shifts from playful to meek. She mumbles a response, but her voice has become small, and her eyes are glazed with a sudden apprehension. Having noticed that we had been talking, he enquires in a manner that sounds more like a threat, “What are you telling them?” He turns to introduce himself, “I am God, I am everybody’s God here…” but before he can speak any further, Vijay takes Nargis’s father aside to warn him regarding the abuse she has confessed here today. Vijay explains the legal repercussions of any future instances of violence and manages to convince him to enrol her to school next week itself. He exits the gates without a word. Her reaction to his presence, and her lack of inhibition in his absence are harshly contradictory, yet when asked if she likes her father, her response is swift and assured, “Yes.”

Due to the poor financial status of the community, child labour is pervasive in the area. Minors are engaged in informal work environments from a young age, for various reasons. Some parents cannot leave their children at home alone, and cannot afford a day care facility. So, their children accompany them to work. Others have to turn bread winners. Raghu*, at 13, has already switched four jobs, “I started working at the *mandi* (vegetable market) first. I used to place the vegetables at a vendor’s stall and sell it. After that, I sold tea at a shop. Then, I started transporting cartons of Pepsi to various shops. I used to sit on the bike behind the man who used to supply the cartons. We’d take four or five cartons at a time. The money I earned from those jobs, I invested in building my own shop. I opened it on *Raksha Bandhan* (a Hindu festival) this year. I wanted to have my own shop because my employers used to shout at me and scold me. The nephew of the vegetable vendor used to hit me. He lives nearby, but he doesn’t bother me anymore.” Raghu manages his shop with his mother. His elder brothers, aged 15 and 18, work as a clerk and a painter, respectively. The family’s financial condition may have worsened after Raghu’s father passed away four years ago. Perhaps owing to this, he was admitted to school only two weeks ago, in the fifth grade. How does a teenager juggle education with entrepreneurship? “In the morning, when I’m in school, my mother stays at the shop. We sell tea, chips, etc. I am at the shop from 3 PM to 9 or 10 PM. When I get home, I study a little bit before sleeping. In my village, Chapra, in Bihar, I studied till class 3. I

“I like studying more than (working at) the shop. I want to study and become something.”

RAGHU, 13

was in school since nursery, and I used to go for tuitions. We came here because we didn't have any work there." Recently, CHETNA organised an interaction between a police constable and an inspector, and the kids at the Badshahpur centre. Raghu speaks enthusiastically of the visit —"When the police officers came, I put garlands around their necks. I've been coming here since six or seven months. I've learned how to speak properly to elders, and not to use bad language. I like studying more than the shop. I want to study and become something."

Progress in Hindsight

In Gurugram, CHETNA's scope of operations has proved very successful. The impact is visible on ground through interactions with the bright students who had been isolated from formal education prior to the intervention of the team of educators working here. Says Vijay, "We planned to engage 120 kids over a period of one year, and we've already enrolled more than 80 kids in school over 9 months. We have opened bank accounts for 60 of these children, and plan to do so for all 120 kids. The authorities ask for various documents which confuses the adults, but we support them in the procedure. We set realistic targets, and we have achieved them in time."

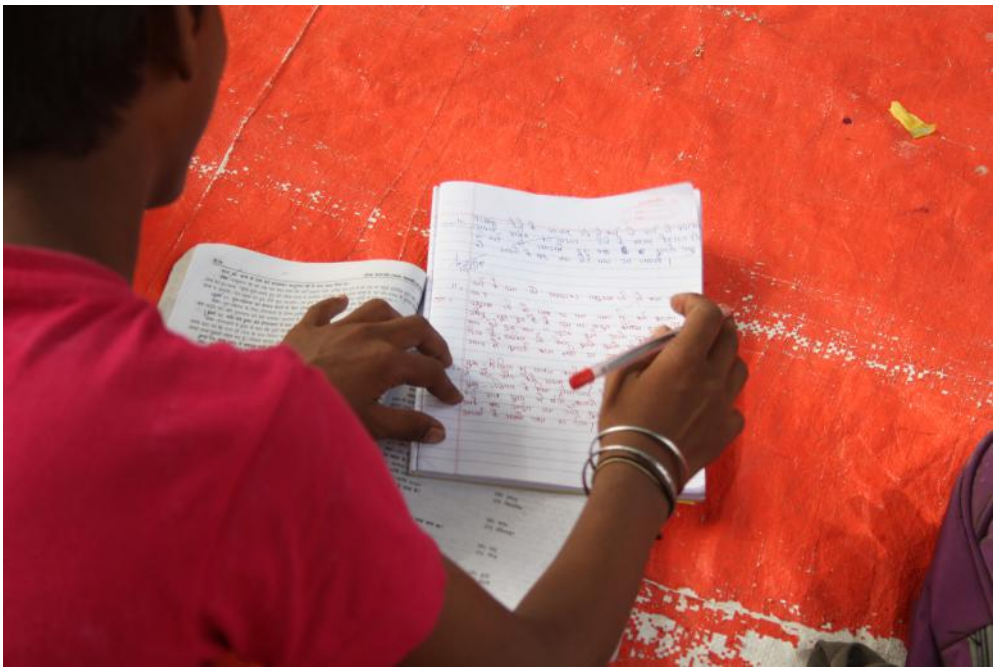
While significant progress has been made, it is a challenge for the organisation to tackle issues that they cannot eradicate. Children are often forced to prioritise the well being of their families above their individual development. For instance, Shivam* (11) is unable to regularly visit the centre since he has to act as a caretaker for his father, who uses a prosthetic leg. "My father doesn't have a foot. My mother cleans houses, so does my sister. I can't come here these days because there's a lot of work at home." He goes on to explain his academic history—"In the village, I studied till class two. It has been three years since we came to the city. There wasn't money at home, so my mother had to find work here." Vijay adds, "He used to take care of his father. He bathed him, gave him medicines on time. So, he couldn't leave the house." Since Shivam had to remain at home all day, he was also unable to go to school for three years. After visiting CHETNA's centre for a few months, Shivam returned to school two weeks ago, "I'm in class five. Class starts at 8:30 AM, ends at 2:30 PM. After school, I fetch water, wash utensils, get food stuff. At home, I make rice. I mix two glasses of rice, and 1.5 mugs of water. Then, I serve food to everyone. After that, we watch TV. Whatever serials my mother likes, we watch." Shivam speaks with a diligence that is heartening. It is clear that he understands his duty towards his family, yet he does not underestimate the value of investing in his future through education.

"I like coming here because only kids come here."

MEENA, 11

The centres have organically emerged as contact points—not only between the organisation and its beneficiaries, but also between the children who inhabit these communities—to serve as spaces of security and solidarity. As Meena* (11) puts it, "I like coming here because only kids come here. I reach at 3 PM, and I stay here till 4:30 PM. My photo has even appeared in *Balaknama* (CHETNA's bi-monthly publication, highlighting the condition of street and working children). I didn't read the article, I only saw the photo." Now in third grade, Meena has also been attending school for the past 15 days. While she does help with housework, most of her day is dedicated to studying. But this was not always the case—"My sister studied till class seven, and my brother is in class six. I studied till class 3 in the village. We came here when I was 9, because we needed to

earn money for my sister's wedding. My parents clean people's houses. They used to say, 'If you also do this (when you grow up), how will it work?' When I grow up, I want to be a teacher, so that I can teach other kids like us."



Outside the temple in Badshahpur, a few residents are gathered, and they greet Vijay as we exit. "The stakeholder support in this area has been really great," he comments afterward. So, we seek an assessment of the project from local resident Mr. Shyam Das*, a mechanic by profession who acts as a stakeholder at this location, "I am very happy with CHETNA, their work has been great. Most kids here go to school, but the parents too are under obligation. We have told the parents to contact us if they have any issues. We also tell them not to talk about money in front of kids. We are well acquainted with Vijay sir. If you want to teach kids, you must. We want the kids of poor people to move ahead too."

It is important to observe that these stories are unfolding all around us. These children are among the vendors we buy groceries from, the *chaiwalas* at the roadside tea stall, the ones who clean our high rise buildings and apartments, the beggars we shoo away at traffic signals—we are surrounded by them, yet we do not attempt to communicate compassionately. Each individual, in their own capacity, can contribute to the welfare of these children by simply practicing empathy. Progress is sometimes non-linear—observed in hindsight, but achieved through a sequence of relentless efforts on ground, a day at a time. Synergising their focus on the task at hand, CHETNA continues to empower underprivileged children in Gurugram, one tin shed at a time.

***names have been changed to ensure anonymity**