Bridging the Gap

An immersive approach towards inclusivity in the Indian education system

In the depths of Western Delhi, a variety of job opportunities and domestic constraints divert children from low income households away from the perks and routine of academic life. For most of these children, access to education is limited or denied for various reasons. To combat the inadequacies of the education system and the socio-cultural realities that divert children away from mainstream education, CHETNA introduced the Street to School Project in partnership with Toybox Charity (UK) in 2015. By functioning across 12 locations to ensure uniform penetration in some of the most disadvantaged areas in West Delhi, the project seeks to impact those in urgent need of intervention.

CHETNA

Childhood Enhancement Through Training and Action

TOYBOX

Changing the world for street children

Ink Stains Adorn the Vaghri Patriarchy

The clothes traded during the *pheri*

A line of temples—both ornate and humble—constitute the solid frontier of Raghubir Nagar in West Delhi. Beyond the shrines lies an area densely populated by a diverse community, dominated largely by the 'Vaghri' caste that migrated from Gujarat to Delhi more than 50 years ago. "This is known as Delhi's 'Mini Gujarat'," says Kavita, a teacher at one of the three education clubs established by CHETNA for children aged 8 to 12 in the area. These clubs serve as meeting grounds for children studying at the primary school level. Their main purpose is to ensure admission and retention of students from disadvantaged communities into the mainstream education system. Currently, almost 150 children in the area are beneficiaries of this programme, aptly named 'Street to School'. "We've come to be known as 'admission *waali* madam' here! We're the link that connects the kids to schools. People first approach us for assistance in documentation and enrolment, and we conduct daily community outreach to identify children who are not going to school." Currently, the CHETNA educators have succeeded in enrolling the majority of children living in the area to the three government primary schools nearby.

Most members of the Vaghri community are traders. In West Delhi, they have adopted a form of barter trade which they term as '*pheri*'. Everyday except Monday they set up shop in the nearby '*mandi*' (marketplace), where they sell second hand cloth material to merchants who then sell these cloths to wholesalers. Their days run long, beginning in the wee hours of the morning and ending in the late evening. Before CHETNA intervened, most children of the community would spend their days either at the *mandi* selling goods with their families, or at home performing chores and supervising younger siblings. There are two "levels of *pheri*", as Kavita explains "Some of the relatively wealthier families source rejected clothes from export houses. They then divide the clothes based on quality and selling price, and sell it to wholesalers or directly to consumers at the *mandi.* On an average, they sell a garment at ₹50 per piece. The lower level, on the other hand, buys utensils from local shops and goes from door to door trying to barter the utensils in exchange for second hand clothes, which they sell at the *mandi*." Indeed, the Raghubir Nagar *mandi* is well known across West Delhi—a common hunting ground for recycled fashion, established and preserved by the members of the Vaghri community.

Here at the K Block education club, ten year old Vijay* is completing his Math homework before noon, when he must get ready for school, "School is from 1 PM to 6 PM," he says. Vijay has been going to school since he was 8 years old, when he was identified by Kavita, who first trained him in basic learning skills and then enrolled him to a government school in the locality. Following the untimely death of his parents, Vijay was taken in by his paternal uncle. "I live with my uncle and aunt and six brothers. We live here in K Block," he gestures towards his house right across the lane facing us. "I'm the youngest. They love me a lot." Before he started going to school, however, Vijay used to accompany them to the *mandi* everyday, and upon enquiry he reluctantly demonstrates his task at the market—"*Baalti lelo! steel lelo!"* (Buy the buckets, buy the utensils), he whispers in a rhyme. "I didn't like going there. You have to shout a lot, and I'd start feeling dizzy after a while. I like school. I made friends there on the second day itself! Sometimes, on holidays, I still go to the market. If a like a garment, I keep it. If I don't, we sell it."

Parul* (11) and Sanya*—"I'm 11, or 12, I'm not sure. We were born a few days apart."—who are seated beside Vijay, echo his experience. Says Parul, "Now we go to the Tagore Garden School across the road, but sometimes we still go for *pheri*, only on off days. Earlier, I spent the day there with my mother and grandmother, from 7 or 8 AM to 6 or 6:30 in the evening." Sanya adds, "but we also do work at home, like washing the utensils and clothes, and chores around the house. Now school is from 7:30 AM to 12 PM for us. Initially, we used to fear that our parents won't come to pick us up after school. Now, I've made friends, and Parul and I go to and return from school together everyday." Parul chimes in,"I liked school from day one, because ma'am gave us food there. The other kids were nice, too. The teachers are very nice, and Kavita ma'am here teaches us very well." How do their parents feel about this shift in routine? "Earlier they weren't happy when we started going to school, because we used to take care of our younger siblings, but now they are fine with it." Vijay, on the other hand, confirms that he is not expected to do chores at home and would not be asked to supervise a younger sibling, if he had one.

The Street to School Programme seeks to not only enrol, but also sustainably retain children in school. The children already enrolled in school did not have any prior academic training, making it difficult to integrate them into the standard curriculum. In order to address this loophole, street educators at education clubs have to build a solid foundation for their students. Says Kavita, "The first thing I teach the children is how to hold a pencil, then we move on to the alphabet, basic grammar and math. It takes around six months for them to adjust to the academic mindset." Add to this the challenge of overcoming an oppressive system of ignorance towards education, specifically the education of girls. "Initially, it was difficult to convince the parents to even hear me out. They would shut the door in my face. They did everything they could to keep me out, including breaking my slate and chalk box, but eventually they understood. Their mindset is, 'What will our kids do after studying? They have to ultimately do *pheri*'. They want their kids to have basic knowledge of mathematics, which will actually help in trade. Educating the parents is the most difficult part. It took me around one year to do this, and now they take the initiative to approach me if they're seeking admission for their child."

The SDMC Primary School in Raghubir Nagar

Under a new programme launched by the state government, termed 'Mission *Buniyaad*', children seeking admission are to be enrolled in grades corresponding to the appropriate age, not their literacy levels. They are then divided into three categories within the grade, depending on their cognitive skills. Mrs. Renu Chawla, Principal of the SDMC Primary School in B-2, Raghubir Nagar, elaborates—"Students sit in a particular section together until all their basics are covered. While it does take the older kids some time to adjust, the kids admitted in nursery, who are three to four years old, are very bright. Parents do not admit girls to secondary school. The father's male power does not allow them to study further. Even at the parent teacher meetings, mostly only mothers accompany the kids. Here, when the groom's family visits to see the girl before marriage, the only question they ask is if she can do *pheri*." The key challenge faced by the school administration and CHETNA staff, however, is something inherent in the Vaghri community tradition—an annual religious pilgrimage to their place of origin. The kids spend at least five months a year in their cluster of villages in Rajasthan. They travel for weddings, vacations, festivals, but most regularly for this annual religious ceremony in the summer, where all members of the community gather to pray to their goddess at various temples. Mrs. Chawla explains, "It is compulsory to attend the ceremony. There is social pressure, so they miss school for two-three

months. It becomes difficult for them to keep up due to long absences. They cannot coordinate the ceremony with their vacations because it happens on a fixed day. The only solution is to admit them temporarily in the village school while they are visiting, till their return. I have suggested this to the parents. Many of them also send kids to school only because there is nobody at home to take care of them, only 50% of them truly want to educate their children. It is not the child's fault, but how can you force water down the throat of someone who is not thirsty?"

"CHETNA is recruiting children, teaching them basics, and getting them admitted to school. The NGO goes within the community and their staff coordinates with us, which works out well."

MRS. RENU CHAWLA
PRINCIPAL, SDMC PRIMARY SCHOOL

Mr. Naresh Kumar, Principal of the boy's school that functions in the afternoon from the same building, endorses the concerns of his counterpart. "Around 98% of the students are from Vaghri caste. After March, almost 50% start leaving for their village. They go either during harvest season, or special occasions, or the religious ceremony. Only 10% of the parents are dedicated to educating their children. Age-appropriate kids are not being admitted, and only half of them are regularly attending school. Most parents have low interest in education, and are not willing to compromise. The kids study all the core subjects here, and have been segregated according to their knowledge base as per Mission *Buniyaad,* to bring them into the mainstream. However, the loophole is that the 50% kids who do not attend school cannot reap the benefits of this. During exams, kids will show up out of nowhere to write their papers. Of the total strength of 350, only 40% are currently attending school."

Both Principals agree that the role of the NGO is to serve the community, but also to collaborate with the local educational institutions. Says Mrs. Chawla, "CHETNA is recruiting children, teaching them basics, and getting them admitted to school. The NGO goes within the community and their staff coordinates with us, which works out well. When they find kids, we ensure the admission is done. When students here are unable to cope with the studies, we send them to the CHETNA teachers after school (for remedial classes)." Kavita understands her role in this partnership, and performs it wonderfully at the school as well as in the K Block community area where she holds classes adjacent to a heaped bundle of clothes sorted before sale, surrounded by kids and parents who now trust her completely. She says, "There is a need for NGOs here, which is my biggest motivation. If there was already awareness among them, I would not be required here. But there is a need, so here I am."

Sejal, Project Beneficiary

At the neighbouring B1 block in Raghubir Nagar, Chitra, another CHETNA educator, agrees that changing the Vaghri mindset has proved a challenging task. "Girls as young as eight years old cook full meals and do chores around the house. They make better *rotis* than me! There is a lot of discrimination between girls and boys here. Parents force the boys to go to school, but ask us what girls will achieve by going to school. Many of them used to take children to the *pheri* with them because they couldn't leave them home alone. Still, some of the parents treat this as a day-care facility, but the dedicated kids come here everyday, I don't even have to tell them. I've been here for three years now, but it took between one to one and a half years to convince the parents. " Here, in the small park where classes are held between 10 AM to 6 PM throughout the week, a group of girls sit facing her, solving sums under Chitra's guidance. "Two or three of them still go to work, but the vast majority have left work and started going to school."

Vineeta (11) and Sejal (10) are amongst the students who regularly attend both the school and Chitra's lessons. Vineeta shares, "We study in the fifth grade. After school ends at 12:30, I give food to my siblings and put them to sleep. We come here for tuitions by 2 PM. We like coming here because we want to study, and we also want to teach others. We want to become something in life. I want to be a teacher." "And I want to be a doctor," smiles Sejal. Do they also teach other kids in the neighbourhood? Vineeta responds frankly, "It is very difficult to make girls study, specially those older than ten years. I want my friends to study, but their parents don't allow them to. My friend wanted to study till class 10th, but her parents made her drop out when she was in class five." Sejal highlights another problematic aspect of educating children in the area—"There are elder kids in the locality. They drink and use drugs, and younger kids get influenced." "They even talk back to their parents," comments Vineeta.

Afternoon classes in progress at the B1 Block Education Club

Until a few years ago, both of them used to accompany their parents for *pheri*, "from 10 AM to 4 or 5 PM." In addition to this, they would perform chores around the house such as cooking or washing utensils. The remaining time was devoted to taking care of their younger siblings at home. Resham*, who has just arrived at the club with her mother alongside, shares, "I used to go to the *mandi* from 2 AM to 10 AM, but I don't work anymore." These may seem like odd timings for a work day, but many children have to wake up before sunrise to reserve a prime spot at the market before customers start pouring in early morning. These are not isolated instances. This is the norm in Raghubir Nagar. As we start discussing further education, something resembling uncertainty and resignation paints Vineeta's otherwise animated features—"It is not upto me how far I study. That is my parents' decision." She glances momentarily to her right before shifting her focus back to the notebook. Chitra mentions, "We even accompany the girls for admissions to secondary school. Their parents are not concerned."

Resham's mother interjects, "Since the primary school is currently nearby, it's fine. What will happen when the have to travel further? You can't trust anyone these days, so I just stay at home and work only at the *mandi*. My elder son had to go back to work at 14, to earn money. I ask people here to teach their kids but they believe that kids won't find work even after studying. Where are the jobs? This country has turned hollow. There should be a law forcing children to go to school, and punishment for those who don't comply. I want her (Resham) to study, but my brother-in-law made it very difficult for us. Even if she studies a little, she will be able to do something." Stressing the importance of a safe learning environment for students, she adds, "Gujarati kids are very troubled here. The kids play cards, gamble, and get into substance abuse. Earlier, in this park, kids and adults would loiter around playing cards while the kids studied. The men do it, so the kids do it." After witnessing the children's dedicated efforts, the men who used to be stationed in the park during study hours have shifted their activities elsewhere. It is a testament to sheer will and determination that the vulnerability and domestic obligations of girls in this community have failed to obstruct their academic pursuits. Here, the only way out is through—a sentiment best described through Anu's* story.

Seated on a wide plastic sheet beneath the ample shade of a formidable banyan tree at the B2 education club, Anu smiles brightly with a joy that pours out of her eyes, as she shares her daily schedule while simultaneously scribbling swiftly in her notebook. "I wake up at 3 AM, wear my school uniform, then I comb my hair on my way to the *mandi*. I stay there till seven, and then I go to school.

"I used to go to clean houses with my mother. I would sweep the floors everyday. Once Rekha ma'am got me admitted into the fourth grade, my mother started sending me to school everyday."

ANU, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

When I return home at 1 PM, I wash the utensils and clothes, and make *rotis*. I reach here by 2 PM, and leave at 5 PM. Till around 6 PM, I sleep. My mother tells me to sleep and take rest. In the evening, I go to the market to sell *neem daatun* (a tooth cleansing twig). Sometimes, a *Sardarji* (Sikh man) comes and buys *daatun* worth ₹500. He also gives us gifts on festivals. Then at night, I play ludo with my brother, and I sleep by 11 PM." This contrast against how she spent her time back when she did not go to school, "Earlier I would wake up at 3 AM and work at the *mandi* till 8 AM. My mother used to sell the clothes, and I used to watch over them. Then I'd come back and do housework all day. When I was bored, I'd watch cartoons or something. Back then, there was no-one to play ludo with. I didn't like going for *pheri* because all the other kids were studying. When people would come home, they'd ask me 'Don't you go to school?' Then, Rekha ma'am (Street Educator at the B2 education club) started teaching me" She pauses for a moment before turning towards Rekha and unleashing a gleeful roar, "THANK YOU REKHA MA'AM!"

Some children continue to balance work and studies, explains Rekha ma'am, "They still sell things like balloons on the roads, others work as domestic help or accompany their fathers to the shop. I had to pester Anu's family for two months to convince them to send her to school everyday. They used to refuse, saying that she's a good worker. She would work all morning, return home, cook food, wash the clothes, and clean the house. Finally, I reached out to her grandmother, who agreed. Nobody else in her family supported it." With such a busy day, it would be safe to assume that Anu feels exhausted at times, but she counters, "I don't get tired. I'm in the habit of working. Where's the time to be tired? I used to look at girls in their uniform going to school, and used to feel so happy, and a little sad too-" a goat tethered to the banyan sneezes loudly, prompting full throated laughter from all the kids assembled at the education club. Once the fit subsides, Anu continues,"When I first started going to school, I used to feel 'Is this a dream?' I was confused on the first day. I went with my sister, who was already in school, and she told me what to do. You have to pray, stand up, then study. I was afraid that the teacher there would hit me, but she has never laid a hand on me, till date. When I'd come back, my mother used to ask me if I like school, and I love school. I like studying English." In fact, something special happened at school today. "Today I got a surprise. Ma'am gave me a gift because a boy was about to trip down the stairs, but I held his hand and saved him. If I hadn't, I'd have gotten a scolding, so I did it. She gave me a new bag," she narrates animatedly.

While Anu still works with her family everyday, 12 year old Gayatri, a student of 7th grade, has experienced a more drastic evolution. "I used to go to clean houses with my mother. I would sweep the floors everyday. Once Rekha ma'am got me admitted into the fourth grade, my mother started sending me to school everyday. There are eight people in my family. Now, they're all happy seeing me study." These are only a few accounts of the impact generated by a team of dedicated workers aiming tirelessly to uplift children in backward communities through CHETNA's Street to School project. In an atmosphere that systematically oppresses the right of the girl child to education and opportunity, there has been a quantifiable modification in the collective conscience of the population here, and all signposts to the future point further north.

Anu, Project Beneficiary

Interestingly, most of these children insist they want to be either “police”, or “teacher”. Chitra explains, “Those are the two professions they most often encounter in their community. That is what they are exposed to, so that’s what they aspire to be.” Perhaps, ten years from now, Raghubir Nagar will be home to a fair amount of law enforcers and educators. Anu’s proclamation today might also be a prophecy. A decade from now, she might still be in a classroom, but the tables will have turned. She will be the one teaching the lessons, and a cry from the front bench might emerge as a clear echo resounding from the hollow trunk of that looming banyan tree—“Thank you, Anu ma’am!”

A Portrait of Perseverance

“This is the only open area where there is a little bit of space to sit for anyone,” says Geeta, a CHETNA educator at Chunabhatti, a district of Kirti Nagar in West Delhi. We are sitting on a circular platform covered on top by a metal roof, open on all sides. In the afternoon, this shared space serves as a resting spot for labourers and woodworkers on their lunch break. Before and after the lunch hour, this space is reserved for 50 kids of the area who are currently gaining access to informal education through CHETNA’s Street to School Programme.

The primary occupation of people in this area is constructing and carving furniture—mostly chairs, door frames, and sofas. Located along a train track, the slum houses primarily woodworkers, who also engage their children in various occupations. Before selecting a location for intervention, the staff carries out a survey of the area to estimate the need for intervention. Based on her experience working at the centre, Geeta estimates, “The parents have no interest in the education of boys or girls. Many men get drunk and violent at night. Nine year old girls here work as domestic workers, or stay home to take care of their siblings. It has taken time, but many girls have now left work. They only go to work when their mothers are ill. They focus on studies. Girls pay more attention. Some kids simply understand what learning means. Initially, the parents had no ID proof, and they were scared of school. They felt the teachers will not accept their children, or understand their background.” The scene before us—children spread out amidst the afternoon crowd, engrossed in their notebooks—is a silent response to this ideology that threatens their development. “Last year (2017-18), our target for Street to School was to get 500 kids admitted to school. We managed to enrol 505 kids.”

Street Educator Geeta also conducts outreach activities to engage children within the slum

Naman* and Anish* instantly stand out from the group of kids assembled here. They are the most jovial and verbose students around. However, this is also an outcome of their transformation. Geeta glances amusingly at Naman, only to reveal—“He used to be very shy, barely spoke—and now he won’t shut up! He also used to stay very dirty, his hygiene was poor. Now look at him—he keeps himself clean.” Naman has recently won a race at school—a fact he doesn’t boast of, but isn’t coy about either, if it happens to be brought up in conversation. At 12, he has already set noble goals for the long journey ahead, “I want to help children. Many kids dream of school, but they can't go. Elders slap kids and don’t care about their feelings. I will become anything, but I will help kids.” He is not being brazen. He speaks from experience, “Earlier I was weak in studies. Pawan sir slapped me twice at school, then I started studying.” It sounds as if he has forgiven his school teacher, or convinced himself that the end justified the means, but he clearly hasn’t forgotten the trespass. It is strange to think that the boy sitting opposite us used to be timid until a few years ago. It has been almost three years since he was

enrolled in second grade at the local government school by Geeta. However, embarking on this journey was no easy task. "It was difficult to get his admission done. Whenever I visited his house to talk to his parents, his father would be drunk. Finally, his mother called me on my number, and I got him admitted." For his part, Naman seems to be taking full advantage of the opportunity. "Our school is the best. It's better than all the other schools. The kids are great, and we always win at the science fair! I haven't participated yet, but sir takes us to see the exhibits." Besides his endearing loyalty towards his school, Naman's most charming quality is that he truly does believe in helping other children. Today, Naman and Anish have together convinced two of their friends to visit the centre. They introduce them to Geeta, who takes it upon herself to have them enrolled in school. Naman embodies and understands the philosophy that CHETNA endeavours to inculcate in it's beneficiaries—"CHETNA has helped a lot of kids. They work on three things: rights, identity, and government meetings." (The latter refers to efforts directed towards making children interact with stakeholders such as police and government officials, lawyers, and others who can safeguard their rights.) It is fascinating that he actively allows this ideology to guide his actions, by convincing other kids to invest in education, while he's simultaneously nurturing another passion as well, "Rakesh bhaiya teaches us dance in the park for free. I wake up at 4 AM, and I go there everyday," he smiles.

"CHETNA has helped a lot of kids. They work on three things: rights, identity, and government meetings."

NAMAN, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

Anish, although a year younger to Naman, also studies in the fifth grade. Like Naman, he too wakes up before sunrise everyday to go jogging for no less than two hours. He begins to recite a long list of sports he enjoys ("Kabbadi, khokho, volleyball,…)—one that does not seem to end, until it does. Today a reporter from CHETNA's bi-monthly publication 'Balaknama' has come to visit the centre, and speak to kids regarding any issues they might want to bring to light through the newspaper. Anish speaks animatedly to her before turning to us, and sharing his grievance—"Some kids here work at tea stalls or do wood work. I tell them to study but they say their family is in trouble, so they must work." As he is talking, Naman's sister Manisha* returns form school, still in her uniform, and greets us before she starts chatting with Geeta and the Balaknama reporter. Anish recounts the highlight reel of his academic life, "I studied at Daryapuram in Azamgarh, UP, till fourth standard. Then we came here. (Geeta) Ma'am convinced my parents to take me to school. I was admitted to third grade. My parents were happy, they used to be tense when I didn't go to school. At first, I used to miss my parents at school. I used to be alone. I was afraid that someone would hit me, or abduct me, or make me work. Pawan sir taught me to not be scared. Then one day a kid sat next to me and asked, 'Will you be my friend?', and I said yes." Who was the kid? Anish points swiftly towards Naman, and they share a brief smile. They seem joined at the hip, even as they rise together to leave. It is time for the boys to start getting ready for school, so they ask to be excused. Before taking our leave, Naman, who has also shared his grievances with the Balaknama reporter (named Jyoti), looks demandingly at her and says, "Jyoti ma'am, please ensure that my story is published. Bye!" As he leaves, Manisha comments, "You act so innocent here, you should behave like this at home too!"

Manisha, currently a student in eighth grade, also wakes up as early as her brother, but for different reasons. "I wake up at 5 AM, do hand wash at the public toilet, then put food on the gas. I always cook, then bathe, etc. At 7:20, I leave for school. I go till Ramesh Nagar in the battery rickshaw—" Geeta interrupts, "How much does the driver charge you?" "₹5. He used to charge ₹10, but I told the police about it." Manisha comes across as headstrong and assertive, but she admits her singular flaw quite frankly, "I don't take lunch to school. I don't feel hungry. This is my only weakness. When I return home, I eat one or two rotis, then I go to work at Ramesh Nagar again. I work in houses—sweeping, cleaning, washing utensils." Her mother works as a domestic help as well, but going to work is not a new development for Manisha. "I've been working since we came to Delhi, in 2015. I'd already studied till class five in my village, Samastipur in Bihar. In the village, my mother and *daadi* (grandmother) fought, so we came here with my *bua* (aunt). When we came to Delhi, we first lived in Old Delhi. We wandered around and found a place to work. My sister fell very ill, and since we had no food, she became sicker. The *anganwadi* (government child care centre) used to give us *khichdi,* rice and some other food. We ate whatever they gave. We used to ask my father to send us money, but he used to spend all his money on alcohol. My mother worked in a factory there. I started going to work because my *bua* hit my mother on the head with a brick. I used to stitch things in a shop, and they

gave me food in return. Then, one night, my father came home and tried to strangle my mother. Then, he tore my clothes and started blurting out abuses. He hit me. We left Old Delhi and came here. He came back and fell at my feet—he asked for forgiveness, but I said no. The other day, he called to say he will kill us. I told him to try it, and see what happens. He works, sleeps, and eats at his office. My *daadi* wants to help, but my father thinks we are nothing to him. He has sent money, but won't give us more than ₹500 for ration. Who can run a household in that much? He can't raise us."

Manisha, Project Beneficiary

It was when she arrived at Chuna Bhatti that a CHETNA educator caught her eye. "Seema ma'am saw me walking around here, and she asked if I studied, so I said no. Then, she asked if I'd like to study, and I said 'Yes! A lot.' I used to watch kids in uniform going to school. Ma'am sat us down and explained things to us. She made me the monitor. Then Geeta ma'am came and got my admission done. It was difficult because I didn't have ID proof. I was admitted in fifth class. I can't tell you how happy I was! Soon, I started performing well at school, and teachers used to praise me." However, this new phase came with it's own set of challenges—"I was very scared because of the boys who tease girls on the street. Then, CHETNA gave us karate training for self defence. They taught us to shout, scream and fight if anyone touched us. After that, I used to face the boys strongly. When people tease me, I handle them. I threaten them, and they stop." Her conviction is resolute, even as she faces an oppressive mentality within her household, "I'm the girl of the house, so people blame me whenever there is a fight. They say, 'You are no *Laxmi* ' (goddess of wealth and abundance). I listen in silence, and then I cry when I'm alone. I didn't study for one, or maybe two years. I've been working here for two years now. I myself tell people in school that I go to work. I can't hide it. People in CHETNA's office used to tell me not to work. I felt very bad. I felt I shouldn't be working. I don't like working. I work because I have to. My mother tells me I must work for money and food. so I'll have to. When I started going to school, she asked 'How will you work?' I told her I'll come back after school and go to work, then she agreed." At a tender age, Manisha has been saddled with the responsibilities of an adult. From what she earns every month, she keeps nothing for herself. She hands it over to her mother, and gives pocket money to her younger siblings as well. Although her journey has been remarkable, largely owing to her own hard work and dedication, she does mention how being engaged with an organisation can provide a safety net to vulnerable children—"Everyone knows I'm associated with CHETNA. My photo has appeared in Balaknama many times. It is a great organisation. They made me a talkative reporter (for Balaknama). They felt I deserved it. I thank them from my heart." Manisha now intends to leverage every opportunity for self determination, "I'm going to be a police officer. I will put a lock on drinking and fighting, and people will have no illnesses, no problems."

"I didn't study for one, or maybe two years. I've been working here for two years now...I don't like working. I work because I have to."

MANISHA, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

A five minute walk from the Chuna Bhatti education club, CHETNA educator Radha holds her classes at the steps of a compact temple located on the outskirts of Nehru Camp, another expansive slum in the area. Here too, children between 7 to 14 years of age gather from morning to evening, before or after school hours. Today, most of them are excited to be leaving for their villages. Their summer vacations have commenced, and their friends have already reached their respective villages. Most of them are keen to kickstart the annual retreat, which is evident as they speak restlessly—the anticipation of a long awaited homecoming unfolding in shy whispers and giggles.

In the midst of this chatter, 12 year old Sonia narrates what a typical school day looks like for her, "School starts at 8 AM, we're back home by 2 PM. We study Hindi, English, Maths, Science, Social Studies, and Punjabi. After coming home, I eat, go to the washroom, come to tuition (the children refer to the education club as 'tuition'), then at 5 PM I go back home. I fill water—three bottles, and two boxes." She admits, somewhat reluctantly, that she does much more to help around the house. "I make food, wash the utensils, wash clothes…then I sleep." This is the prevalent culture in Nehru Camp, not too different from the chores imposed on children in other slums where CHETNA has intervened. Radha elaborates, "Their parents are mostly labourers, domestic servants, or ragpickers. The main problem here is that men don't do much work. Women are the breadwinners. Most of the men get drunk, or gamble. Earlier, even children used to work at factories and in houses. Their parents had put them to work. Now, most of them have left that work. Most kids do housework, or take care of younger siblings sometimes, but they are able to adjust well." Currently in seventh grade, Sonia has resumed education after a brief interlude,"I studied from Nursery to class four. Before coming here, we lived in Malviya Nagar (an area in South Delhi). When we shifted here, I repeated fourth grade." It has been four years since Sonia was first engaged by CHETNA at Nehru Camp, and her progress is evidence that children can be successfully reintegrated into the education system and retained in the long term, provided consistent efforts are made by educators and the child to compensate for neglect and insensitivity, both in the academic and domestic realms.

Faced with volatile domestic environments, a looming sense of uncertainty regarding the future they aspire to, and a system that does not protect their interests or safeguard their development; these kids have been able to overcome challenges that should never have marked their childhood in the first place. As they continue to navigate a reality that, for some, is the only one they've ever known; it is heartening to see them forging a path of their own, for themselves, in their own inspiring way. They move forward with the knowledge of the past, but also with the hope of a future they must create for themselves, a day at a time—with a little help along the way. CHETNA's Street to School project adopts a holistic approach by involving key stakeholders such as parents and school teachers into the child's intellectual development and academic progress. Since 2015, the programme encompasses a wide range of activities that compound the impact of the consistent academic intervention at education clubs. By organising monthly peer support group meetings for street and working children, life skill workshops at education clubs and in schools, yoga sessions conducted by street educators, self defence workshops for girls, regular school visits by street educators, and teacher trainings on classroom management skills to discourage use of corporal punishment, the project seeks to create a conducive atmosphere for a child to flourish. To this end, the programme also includes parent meetings at education clubs, trainings for parents regarding admission process, interacting with children, etc., and community awareness rallies to underline the significance of education—in order to ensure that the child's domestic and social environment supports their academic success. To appeal to administrative stakeholders, the project arranges periodic meetings with Education Department officials, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights and other relevant networks, develops newsletters for advocacy and organises stakeholder meetings for sharing of the work model and experience with parents, teachers, media, education functionaries and other government authorities. As part of the project, residential workshops for street and working children are also carried out, aimed at developing leadership skills.

In 2015-16, Street to School was introduced as a pilot project and later extended as a full intervention for 2016-18. In 2015, the project began by engaging 500 children and gradually broadened its scope—ultimately impacting 500 children. In the year 2017-18, 511 children were enrolled to government schools through CHETNA. 477 of these children were successfully retained in school, indicating a retention rate of 93.3%. Now in its fourth year, the project is impacting 511 children and working towards the sustaining these remarkable outcomes.

*Names have been changed to ensure anonymity