

A Bright Exception



For a one-year period, CHETNA carried out the innovative Project Blue Umbrella in partnership with the Consortium for Street Children. The targeted beneficiaries for this programme were street and working children, primarily since they are more likely to be in contact with law. These children often suffer harassment and neglect at the hands of local police authorities, and do not possess adequate knowledge of their individual rights. In order to address this pertinent issue, Project Blue Umbrella surveyed and selected ten street locations across South and South East Delhi, providing protection cover to over 500 children engaged in begging or selling at traffic signals, market places, or living in low income communities. This was achieved through creating awareness about child rights and sensitisation of stakeholders through regular interactions with the children, as well as organising self-defence workshops for the vulnerable children.

Manik*, a 13 year old student of class eight at the local government school, comes from large family. He lives at Sansi camp (near the Badarpur border in South Delhi) with his parents, siblings, and extended family. "My parents don't work, both of them are ill. My father had cancer, he's been sick since one year now. My mother usually remains unwell. Earlier, she used to sell fruits." Owing to his parents' inability to support expenses, the children of the household have turned breadwinners—"My elder brother, who's 19, is a motor mechanic; and the younger one (16) works at a toy factory. I have a younger sister, who goes to school. My elder

sister is married.” Manik, fortunately, does not go to work. He attends school regularly and spends the remainder of his day engaged at the Blue Umbrella contact point at Sansi Camp, at least three times a week.

“I’ve been a member of *Badhte Kadam* (a federation of more than 10,000 street and working children, mentored by CHETNA) since September 2016. We get to have conversations, understand other people’s problems. When Vineet sir (CHETNA street educator) first started coming here, everyone said he gives tuition classes, so we joined him. Then we went to the CHETNA office for a *Badhte Kadam* meeting, where we were taught about our rights. When we returned, we told the other children here what we had learned. We held a meeting to tell them about *Badhte Kadam*.” The federation encourages qualities of leadership and initiative amongst children, who also attend monthly meetings to discuss their issues and concerns, as part of Project Blue Umbrella. The children also communicate their concerns to *Balknama* (CHETNA’s unique news publication intended towards representing the grievances of street and working children) reporters, the children themselves acting as ‘talkative reporters’ for the newspaper. In one such instance, the issue of the local public toilet supervisor forcing children to clean the washroom was revealed. After the news was published in *Balaksana*, local administrative authorities took up the issue and replaced the supervisor.

Manik has been part of various interactions through Project Blue Umbrella. Impressively, he remembers the exact dates when these activities took place, “We attended a meeting at NCPCR (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights) on January 19, 2018. They showed us a film there, to demonstrate where all people should not touch us, and if they do, it is exploitation. Also, they told us to call 1098 if we’re in trouble. On January 28, we went to Lodhi Road to meet a lawyer. He asked us to tell him what our rights were, then we put them (papers listing their rights) on a wall, and made posters about child marriage, child labour, etc. We got prizes. We even went to meet a man from London, at his office.” Manik was also among the many kids from Sansi Camp who took part in painting a wall at the local police station, to encourage interaction between the police force and the children who beg or sell items on the roads.

Manik, owing to his domestic situation, might have been engaged in some form of labour considering his circumstances, but he could choose not to be. The choice afforded to him is not assured to each child who lives here, or to most street children living in urban areas. That he continues to enrich his mind with more noble ideas is testament to the potential for learning and leadership that exists within each child, regardless of the background they are born into. In order for this potential to eventually be achieved, the rights of each child must first be safeguarded. The prime intention behind projects like Blue Umbrella is to create a safe child caring society where all children are allowed opportunities to not only survive, but also thrive in their environment.

***Name has been changed to ensure anonymity**