

An Earnest Effort to Adapt



10 year old Aman* sits immersed in his school work on the white tiled floor of a humble temple at Jawahar Camp, a slum settled in West Delhi's Kirti Nagar area. At the temple, he attends daily classes as a beneficiary of CHETNA's Street to School programme (in partnership with Toybox Charity (UK)). His small voice sounds hoarse as he recounts his early childhood; "I left the village when I was six years old. I didn't live here back then, we lived in Old Delhi. Old Delhi is better than New Delhi. There aren't any slums there." At most slums in Kirti Nagar, children and teenagers can be spotted behind the counter at roadside stalls, shops, or engaged in carpentry. The area remains highly unsafe for young boys and girls. "One day, at least six months ago, I was coming back from school. It was very late, 8 or 9 o' clock at night. It was raining, and this uncle stopped in front of me. He stopped me and said, 'Stay here, or I will pack you up in a room.' I started running, but two more uncles showed up in front of me and said the same thing. Right then, one lady came walking into the lane. She is the mother of one of the boys here. When they saw her, they were gone. I ran away too," Aman shares.

Aman goes to school regularly, but an undiagnosed learning disability makes knowledge retention a constant struggle, "When I was six—at Old Delhi—I fell from the third floor. I was running with my cousin brother's slipper, and there wasn't a wall there (in the balcony). I slipped and fell. When I hit the ground, some bricks fell on me from above. I was unconscious for a while." He points towards his joints and remarks blankly, "All these bones were broken. I couldn't walk for a while. My father and uncle had seen me falling. They took me to the hospital. But here, they were only taking money, and I wasn't getting any better. So, papa took me to the village hospital." For Aman's parents, who work as scrap dealers, quality urban healthcare was beyond their means, "They collect *raddi*

(scrap). Out of the *raddi*, they make copies (notebooks), *mithai* (sweet) boxes, and big boxes for toffees and chocolates.”

After sustaining his injuries, Aman remained in his village for two years before returning to Delhi to pursue his education, “I came back here when I was eight years old. I’m in class four now. School is good, but I have some issues. I feel a lot of heat from the sun when I’m at school. Then, my nose gets blocked. And lastly, I don’t understand anything there...I don’t even feel like talking in school. I find it difficult to remember things. I remember for two or three days. Whatever I study, I forget...but earlier, I could study well.” Despite struggling with this impairment, Aman has recently appeared for his half-yearly examinations, “Exams, I find difficult. You can ask ma’am (CHETNA educator)—even when she teaches me, I forget. I try very hard to remember, but I forget. I don’t like it here (in the city). When I’m here, I feel like going back to the village. My parents tell me, ‘We’ll admit you to the new hostel that’s been built in the village.’ But my sister doesn’t want to study at the hostel. She wants to go to a school a little far away from our village. She’ll have to go by cycle, I guess.” Aman seems keen to return to the village, but it is not his decision to make; “When my father wishes for us to go, we will go there.”

For children like Aman, who require special attention in order to retain information, the government school system does not do justice. The ratio of teachers to students in a classroom is highly disproportionate, making it very difficult to pay due attention to students with special needs. In this scenario, the CHETNA educator at the Jawahar Camp Street to School education club provides necessary aid to Aman, before or after school hours. This provides a facility to Aman, who can resolve doubts during these sessions, which his teachers may have been unable to address at school. He continues to attend school and focus on educating himself, owing partly to the regular interaction with the CHETNA educator. Ideally, a child could depend on their parents to fill this gap. However, when the child themselves is a first generation learner, the intervention of grassroots NGOs like CHETNA serves as a necessary support for integration into academic life.

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