

Illuminating Young Lives

By benefiting children belonging to disadvantaged communities across Noida, the My Community project lays the foundation for upward mobility in the long term.



The My Community project in Noida—executed by CHETNA in partnership with HCL Foundation—provides informal education to street connected children, who are either living or working on streets. With nine strategically located centres operating across Noida, the project seeks to engage children from low socio-economic backgrounds, most of whom are first generation learners from migratory communities. They are engaged in rag picking, household chores, or working as street vendors. Since May 2017, the project has succeeded in connecting children to the mainstream education system; gradually drawing them away from the perils of child labour and academic isolation.



Childhood Enhancement Through Training and Action



Customising Education

A large number of children that the project seeks to impact are working kids. In order to motivate and engage them for the long term, their unique challenges need to be addressed by prioritising their convenience. Within a densely packed room located on the ground floor of a building in Harola locality of Noida, around 30 children are diligently seated, working on academic worksheets and simple writing tasks. They have assembled here at 10 AM this morning, in order to receive basic non-formal education. These are the children who do not go to school yet. However, with sufficient practice and enough persistence, many of them will soon be qualified to enrol. This centre, alongside eight others in Noida, has been established by CHETNA in partnership with HCL Foundation. Mr. Vinod Kumar—CHETNA street educator for Harola—explains, “The centre has been operational since July 2017. The kids receive non-formal education, OBE (Open Basic Education), and remedial classes. We teach children the basics, and if the child has to work simultaneously, we direct them to OBE. If the child has been going to school regularly, we conduct remedial classes for them. On the basis of the child, we make a decision. Some of them are dropouts, (who left) after 6 or 8 months of going to school, and then we mobilise them to study and go to school. However, most of them have never been to school. We conduct activities like yoga, life skill workshops, parents meetings, health camps, and police visits. Since these are street children, it is important to make them interact with the police. We have also taken children to ‘Street Talk’ (a platform created by CHETNA, where children can publicly share their stories). Around 30-35 students visit the centre daily. The children are mostly working children, many are street vendors, many are ragpickers or sell toys, pens, or balloons at the red light. Most are living in their homes, but there are many children who live on the footpath—many go to work due to the poor financial condition of their homes. Most parents are either labourers, or daily wage workers. During parents meetings, we have to motivate them to think about their kids’ futures, to try to convince them. If they are still not convinced, we connect the child to OBE. The centre remains open from 10 AM to 6 PM. In the morning, we conduct OBE classes. After 3 PM, remedial classes begin.”

One amongst these children is Jiya*, an eleven year old girl who regularly attends classes at the centre. When asked if she goes to school, she nods, “I study in class four, since one or two months. I was 10 years old when I first came to the centre. I go to school everyday, from 8:30 AM to 3 PM. Then I go for tuition to the government school from 3 PM to 4 PM, that’s also (provided by) an NGO. They give a separate notebook, they teach the fourth class syllabus.” As with many other children belonging to marginalised and low income groups, Jiya’s academic trajectory has been inconsistent. “I’d been to school when I was 8 years old. I studied only till first grade, and then I left because we couldn’t afford it. Mummy-Papa said, ‘We’ll get you enrolled in a nice school,’ and then Renu *didi* (her friend) brought me here. I started coming everyday. Once I started studying, it only took me two days to learn the Hindi alphabet, but I still make mistakes sometimes. I like to study. I like Hindi and English, I don’t know Math but I try to learn it. They give us sums, and teach us from notebooks. I come here at 4 PM, then read Hindi books and English books, and then do Math sums, so I can learn properly. I stay till 6 PM, sometimes I leave early. After here, I go to the the shop.” She spends her evenings at her fathers compact tobacco shop, located along a wide road in the locality, “We are two sisters, and two brothers. Mummy is a seamstress and papa runs a shop. He sells *gutka* (tobacco). I go with him in the morning, when I have a holiday. I go everyday in the evening.” She also contributes to household

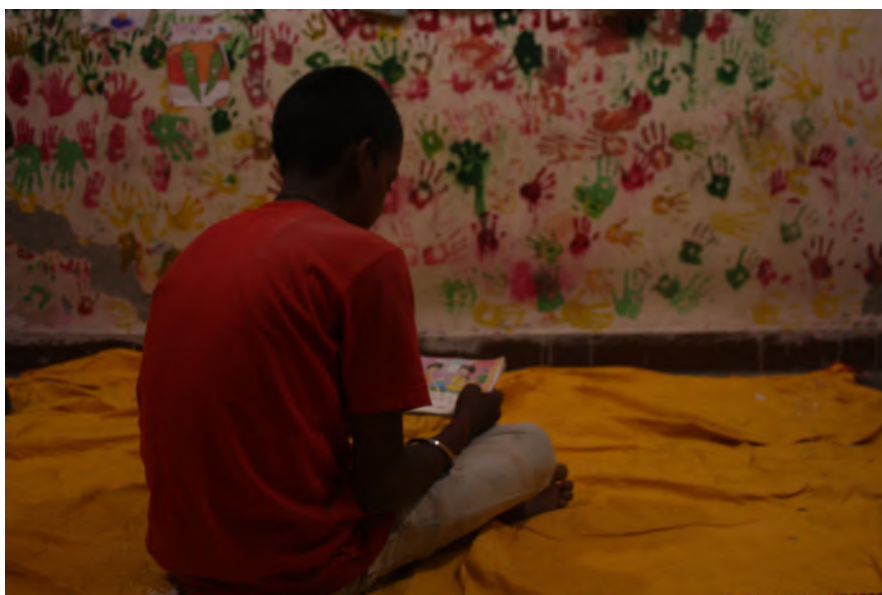


Jiya, Project Beneficiary

chores after her consecutive remedial classes at the local government school and then at the My Community project centre. “Sometimes I help *didi* (her sister) with cooking, sometimes I wash the utensils. I like doing the work, because we all work together for our home. I enjoy studying English and Hindi the most, and working at home.”

Jiya has her reasons for devoting so much of her time to academics. All of this effort is in pursuit of a very significant goal—“I want to be teacher, I’ve had this dream since childhood. That’s why I wanted to go to school. I want to teach little children, so that they can move forward and improve their lives. My (younger) brother also studies in fourth, my elder sister is in tenth grade and elder brother is in seventh. My brother’s mind is sharp but mine is weak, so I thought I’d go to both places (the other NGO and the My Community centre) to study—because I want to come first (top in her exams). I thought I’ll go there from 3 to 4 PM and come here after 4 PM, so at least I’ll learn something.” Her time at her father’s shop fares dull in comparison, “There’s nobody to play with at the shop. I stay there for one or two hours, but I don’t like it. You have to run around, and it gets boring. There’s nobody to play with there.”

Nevertheless, she does observe a change arising as a result of her determination—“Sometimes, I wake up at 6 AM to finish homework, then get ready by 8 AM, and go to school at 8:30. It’s five minutes away. Earlier, I used to keep roaming around in the park, and now I study. I’ve stopped roaming around. When mummy used to go to get me enrolled in school, they would say that I didn’t know enough (to be enrolled to an age appropriate grade). I used to come to Vinod sir always, and he used to teach me nicely. He used to write in the notebook. Vinod sir requested principal ma’am that this girl studies well, if you enrol her, she will always study. I came to the centre, and started studying. I liked studying. Just like this, if more children start studying, I will feel even better.”



Vikas, Project Beneficiary

In contrast to Jiya, Vikas*, whose mother works as a street vendor in the lane where the centre is located, has experienced the frustration of not being able to attend school owing to his circumstances, in spite of his desire to do so. “When I was six or seven years old, I went to school. It’s been an year since I started coming to the centre. *Bhaiya* (elder brother) wanted to get my name written earlier, but mummy was going to the village. I had to go back to the village because my sister’s wedding was cancelled. My village is between UP and Bihar.

Mummy, *bhaiya*, and papa went to the village. I used to help *bhaiya* with the fruit shop. We got my name cut because we had to give the fees for no reason, and *bhaiya* could not look after everything himself. *Bhaiya* has a job, and *didi* (elder sister) can’t sit at the shop, so I had to handle it. I was in fifth grade, and about to go into sixth grade. I used to feel very bad (about being withdrawn from school), so when I told mummy, *bhaiya* sent me to coaching, and he said I could study there till mummy came back (from the village). I kept going there for five or six or eight months maybe. After mummy came back, she had to return to the village (again) to get our house made and look for boys, because *didi* was getting married. Since she kept going back, we couldn’t get me enrolled to school.”

It was during this period that Vikas came in contact with CHETNA staff members. “I used to work here, and used to see Kanchan ma’am (CHETNA educator) teaching. I asked my friend what happens

here, and he made me meet Saurabh *bhaiya* (CHETNA educator), who told me what happens here. Then he wrote my name here. When Saurabh sir used to come, my mummy was in the village. When Vinod sir came, that's when I started coming to the centre. I used to feel a little weird; but slowly, slowly, slowly, I started understanding and found it a little right. I used to come here daily, now I come 5 days a week. I've been going to school for around 15 days now. Mummy got my admission done. I go from 1 PM till 6 PM. Now, I sit at the stall from 7 PM to 9 PM. Then, I get an hour to play, and then shut the shop at 10 PM or 11 PM. I feel a little weird, because we just sit idle (at home), and so I think, 'Okay I could go and work.' At 10 AM I come here (to the centre), stay for one or two hours. I study, or just come here to sit. I just pick up my notebook."

Although he was unable to attend school due to domestic stress, he acknowledges the role played by CHETNA in redirecting him to the correct path. "I didn't like it (when he stopped going to school), but I learned a lot through CHETNA NGO. When Saurabh sir and Vinod sir came, they taught me how to talk to elders. I had become bad when I had left school, so I became weak in studies. They taught me again, sent me back to school. I used to go for coaching, from 7 PM till 9 in the night. If I had time left, I'd sit at the fruit stall. I've even helped my father work. I even told sir that there are (other) kids in my building, and got their name written (at the centre). Now, I sit (at the stall) from 1 PM to 4 PM. When mummy papa go for lunch, then I have to sit. In the morning, I'm there from 7 AM to 10 AM. I come to the centre at 10 AM, and stay here till 1 PM."

"I learned a lot through CHETNA NGO...I had become bad when I had left school, so I became weak in studies. They taught me again, sent me back to school."

VIKAS, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

Even though a large chunk of his daily life is predominated by work, studying now features prominently in his intriguing list of interests, "I enjoy playing 'step'—like somersaults, and I like studying Hindi. When I was a child, I wasn't too interested in studying. Now, I go for tuition, my name has been written in school. Papa didn't find time, so mummy took me to get enrolled. I felt nice. Earlier, we used to just roam around and I felt bad. Then I started coming to the centre, but (initially) I didn't feel like coming because the other kids who used to come after 1 PM, used to go to school. So, I used to feel odd, because I didn't go to school. When mummy used to stay with us, I was fine. When she went (to the village), I became rude and started saying abuses, I used to fight for no reason with other boys. Then when I came to the NGO, but mummy would tell me that they'll take me away. After Vinod sir started coming everyday to the shop (to convince his mother), I started coming here. Earlier, people didn't want to be friends with me, and now they do." His experience with the NGO has proved beneficial, and has empowered him to contribute to the lives of others like himself. "I want to study in a private school, and work in CHETNA NGO only. The kids who work, rag pick, don't have parents—I want to help them, teach them."

Limitations of Labour

Beyond the myriad lanes of Som Bazaar in Noida, a solitary room is located within the residential area behind the crowded marketplace. The room accommodates children from the adjacent slum, providing non formal education and linking them to the mainstream education system. Most of the kids who attend classes here work at the market or sell balloons at the nearby traffic signal. Classes have been conducted in this room since July 2018. Prior to that, the children were taught outdoors, at the nearby park. The centre functions from 3 PM to 6 PM. Arjun*, the second eldest in his family of eleven, which includes his aunt and uncle, is amongst the older children at the centre. He issues orders to the younger kids at the centre, who listen diligently. Today, as the rest of them equip themselves with chalks and slates to practice numbers and alphabets, Arjun sits in a corner to share his experience here, "I've just been coming here since sir started coming. Earlier he used to take us to the park (to study), and then they got this room and now we study here. I think about going to school and studying. I used to like it, I still like it. I study here, I study whatever sir teaches. They've taken us too the zoo, and once there was a meeting, where they took us. I told sir I want to go to school, and he said that first I have to learn something (basic literacy) and then I can go to school. I come here everyday, since I left my job. It has been five or six days now (since he left the job)."



Street educator Mr. Vinod Kumar conducting classes at the Som Bazaar My Community centre

Arjun was a beneficiary of the project even when classes were held outdoors. However, his job obstructed his regular engagement here. Although there are two earning members in his family, he still felt the need to seek employment. “My papa sells balloons, and mummy is a housewife. She sweeps the floors and makes rice for us before we go to work. My elder brother sells balloons, and I work. I work near a college there where a lot of people go to study. I work at a pizza shop. I deliver the pizzas, and I’m learning to make them as well. I leave at 9 AM and return at 6 PM. It’s nice. It’s like how sir comes here to teach us, and he feels good about teaching us. Similarly, I feel good going there and working. I was roaming around, and I didn’t know where to find work so I asked one boy. A friend told me that I’d find work there, and he went with me, and told me about this place. Since then, I started working there. You can take the salary either monthly, or everyday—however you like it. I take it monthly. He doesn’t give much. ₹6000, (so) ₹200 per day. The owner is very good, and I really like doing the work there. It’s been a month now. But I’ve left that work now, because it was too much hard work.”

Arjun explains how employers seek out and lure children to work with them by promising benefits or facilities. “I wake up by 5 or 6 AM, and wake others up, then brush my teeth, and get ready and wake everyone up. When I don’t find work, I go to roam around with friends. We go to the college, Amrapali, and all; but who will go so far (to work)? Plus they (employers) ask you to stay till evening, and they say we’ll give you a room, and give you food, and you stay there (live at the workplace). I tell them that I stay somewhere else, and my parents will get worried if I’m away. On the way there, I feel afraid of the people who drink *charas* (substances) and all. They have knives in their pockets, and you don’t know if they could hurt you.” His experience also reflects the issues working children face in devoting their time or energies towards academic and recreational activities. He recounts how he was first engaged by the My Community project, and why he could not attend the classes regularly until he left his job—“A sir (CHETNA outreach staff) came when we were playing in the garden, and he said we could study and play, and they would take us to see places. So, we agreed. He came for a few days, and then Vinod sir started teaching us. I used to come sometimes, but usually I used to go for work. I used to come to sir when I got an off day from work. I also worked at a restaurant. I used to make *naans*, *rotis*, *sabzi*, etc. That was two or three months ago. The restaurant has shut down now. I go (to work) by my own choice, but whatever I earn, I give to mummy papa. Whatever mummy feels like, ₹10-20-50, she gives me and I go to eat in the market.”

For Arjun and many others like him, work is an integral part of childhood and adolescence. It might not even be considered an anomaly. “I enjoy studying. I want to study and move forward. Whatever

work I get after studying and passing, I will take it up. If I get work now, I will work. If not, then I guess I'll be staying at home all day. I'll come here, but when I get a break from here, I'll have to do work at home. Like filling water, going to the market..." Wherever his journey may lead, for now he has the comfort of the centre to return to everyday. With his consistent efforts, Vinod sir seeks to lead these children towards—hopefully—a more balanced life.

A long way from Som Bazaar, at Sarfabad, another My Community project centre functions from 10 AM to 6 PM. Under the shade of a tree, 15 children are seated calmly on a tarpaulin sheet—all except Bablu*, who stands beside a motorbike parked next to the tree. He and some of his friends are spending the afternoon bursting homemade firecrackers, and continue to burst them at regular intervals within the garbage dump—cluttered with waste of all kinds—spread across one end of the slum. "I'll go to school starting tomorrow, in the government school.

One month ago, I went to school for five days. I didn't feel good there without Saurabh sir (CHETNA educator), and I wanted to study with him. In school I learnt ABCD (alphabet), and 1,2,... (counting). They used to teach kids, give lunch, and we used to play catch-catch. Saurabh sir had sent me to school. He said, 'Lets get your name written in school', and then I started going. Saurabh sir, Shambhu sir, and now even ma'am (the current CHETNA educator at the centre) is very nice. I find English the easiest, because I can finish that work quickly. I can write my full name in English, but I can't write it in Hindi, that's all."



Bablu, Project Beneficiary

It is unclear why Bablu stopped going to school a month ago. A possible reason could be his obligation towards working, "Mummy works in flats (as domestic help), papa works in the fields. He lives in the village, but he's just come to visit us day before. He visits us every two months. I wake up at 4 AM, then brush, then mummy makes food, and then we run from one end to another (to exercise). Then, I fix cars and bikes. I used to do that earlier (too). Sometimes I help the man at the shop here. When he isn't here, and someone (a customer) comes, I put the tyre, and I fix punctures. I like studying in school and here (at the centre), both. Ma'am gives us things to play. I stay here from 10 AM to 1 PM. Then we go and study, my brother teaches me. He teaches me to write Hindi. He works as a guard. I know how to drive a bike, car, trolley, scooty, tempo—I can still drive it, because I

"I used to study as well as work... I've worked at maybe 10 shops... after studying, we go for work. I don't work much, because I'm a child."

BABLU, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

I did that work. I did that work for two years. I used to study as well as work. I've changed tyres and I've worked at Mamora, Hoshiyarpur, this shop, the one after this...I've worked at maybe 10 shops. I used to go rag picking—my friends used to go (along), and we used to pick out *malwa* and metals and sell it for ₹100-200. We used to party a lot—cold drinks, biryani, then play bat-ball. Now I go once a week, because I don't feel like it, because there's a lot of heat. Earlier I used to like it because my friends used to go. After studying, we go for work. I don't work much, because I'm a child."

He has now committed to regularly attending school again. As a result of his work history, however, he already has his twin goals set firmly in place. "I want to be two things—one, a monitor; and the other, a mechanic. I want to study and learn, and become a monitor. And I want to learn work, and become a mechanic. I enjoy drinking Frooti the most, and I enjoy working and studying." As Bablu speaks, a girl interrupts him, wishing to complaint that Bablu hits her. This is Fatima*, a ten year old who also studies at the centre and does not get along with Bablu. In fact, he takes off as soon as she

settles in to talk. Fatima, it seems, is riddled with her own dilemma. “I wake up at 5 AM. My sister goes to work, after telling me to take care of the baby. Then I wash my face, wash the utensils, sweep, and my mummy goes to look for work with my sister. Then I bathe and come to school (she refers to the CHETNA centre as her ‘school’), and then go home to sleep. I play and then we eat and sleep. I have never been to school (in Noida), because there’s a baby at home. I don’t even know where the school is. I want to go to school, because I like to study. I like to play, skip, and I’ve played a lot. I came from my village almost three years ago—it hasn’t been three years yet. My father passed away around 4 months ago. His throat was hurting, he used to vomit. He used to live in Meerut. My brother-in-law doesn’t work, and my sister has to eat, right? Otherwise she will die. So, she works one day, and doesn’t work the next day, and he tells my sister he will not give her food. In my village school, they used to teach Bengali. I’ve studied till 4th (in her village), and I forgot everything when we came here.” Fatima’s family of four comprises her mother, sister, and the baby. Since her father’s death, her sister acts as the primary breadwinner for the family. However, in order for her to be able to work, Fatima has had to abandon her academic pursuits and act as a caretaker for her baby nephew instead. Her sister justifies this by explaining their situation. “My mother hasn’t been able to find work since the past three months. I earn around ₹4000 a month, which gives me enough money to feed four people. She (Fatima) has to stay at home, take care of my child, so that I can go to work. If I don’t work, we won’t have food—we cannot live.” These are the challenging predicaments that the CHETNA staff at such locations navigates, in order to ensure that the children are engaged in formal or non formal education, depending on what is more accessible and feasible for the child’s current situation and limitations.

The Persistence of Effort

A short distance away from the Sarfabad centre lies Amarpali—where another CHETNA centre functions to benefit the child inhabitants of this expansive slum. Here, children are seated under a tin roof in a spacious classroom, big enough to accommodate the vast number of children who attend classes here everyday. They study earnestly; some drawing, some filling out worksheets, and others asking the teacher here, Ms. Archana, to check their work. The centre is open from 10 AM to 6 PM, six days a week, and accommodates more than 60 children on most days. Says Ms. Archana, “Most children work at home or take care of their younger siblings. All of them work at home, and some others work at vendors’ stalls. So explaining to them and convincing them (is a challenge). Secondly, parents are not that involved. Their mothers are domestic help, or working in the nearby buildings as housekeeping staff, or labourers. Since we have a connection with the kids, they come by themselves if we call them. It’s a big thing for the children to come here to study, even in the heat and even though they have to walk a short distance from their home.” The centre seeks to integrate children into the mainstream education system through Non Formal Education (NFE), Open Basic Education (OBE), and remedial classes after school enrolment. Ms. Archana explains why this three-fold approach works, “We are the NFE teachers, these classes happen daily. Twice a week, OBE teachers conduct classes. On the other days, when the OBE teachers don’t come, we teach the OBE children as well. The kids who are working and can’t go to school study through OBE. The school is 5-6 km away, so the children cannot travel such a far distance. The parents fear sending them so far, but they send them to the centre, because it’s right here. So, the centre is always full. Six or seven kids go to the local private school, because they don’t have household responsibilities. They also have an auto that comes to pick them up. The other kids are enrolled in school, but they go irregularly, because it is so far away.”

Salim* is amongst the few children who go to the local private school, because his family works very hard to afford his fees. “My elder brother (15) used to go to school. Now he works here, in the building, in housekeeping. Papa also does housekeeping, and mummy works in houses. I used to go to the Surka government school. I used to go there with my brother and cousin, but they stopped going, so I stopped going. That was at least a year ago, and I only studied in Nursery there. I started going to the private school two months ago.” The first centre at Amrapali opened in June 2017, which is when Salim started attending classes here. He recalls his first encounter with Ms. Archana— “Ma’am asked, ‘Will you go to school?’ I said yes, then I came a few times, and I learned ABCD.” It seemed as simple as that. Now, at ten years of age, Salim not only attends school and remedial classes at the centre, but also attends tuition classes in the evening. These classes are held by a local resident of the apartment

building where his parents go to work. “I wake up at 6 AM, get ready and go to school. School is from 7:30 AM to 1 PM. Papa drops me to the crossing on the cycle. When I come back, I eat and sleep at home. I come to the centre and then I go to tuition from 4 PM to 6PM. Then I come home. After the electricity comes, I do school work and tuition work. I play hockey and cricket.” His life now resembles a more holistic childhood, which is largely credited to his improved access to education and recreation.

“Ma’am asked, ‘Will you go to school?’ I said yes, then I came a few times, and I learned ABCD.”

SALIM, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

Ali*, who also attends the evening tuition sessions with Salim, is in a hurry. His friends, who walk together to the tuition class everyday, are waiting for him to join them while he shares his experience at the Amrapali centre, “I’m 12, about to turn 13. I’ve been coming to the centre since it started under the tree (the classes were previously held under the shade of a tree). I used to go under the tree to play with my friends, and I saw that there were studies going on there. Sir gave me a slate and pencil and said, ‘You can write whatever you want in this,’ so I wrote ABCD. Then I started coming sometimes, but whenever I came, I used to study. When I had to go to work, I used to leave. I work at a cycle shop. I have to open the cycle, and do whatever the people want. Changing tires, tubes, changing the ball—I do all of that. I like doing it. I’ve been doing it for 4 years. One Friday, I saw a cycle and thought me and my friend would open it and see. I’ve been doing it since then. It is my *nana’s* (maternal grandfather’s) shop, and I work there with him.”

As a working child, Ali’s day is packed, with short intervals of rest between the various activities he juggles, “I wake up sometimes, at 7 AM, or sometimes at 4 or 6 AM and then I feel cold and go back to sleep. I brush, wash my face, then go to the shop at 8 AM and come back at 12 PM. I come here, study, recite poems, alphabets, spellings, identify images. I stay here till 2 PM, eat, then go back to sleep. Then I wake up and go to the shop, when *nana* comes (home) for lunch. I go to the flats (tuition classes) at 4 PM, where we sing the national anthem, pray and then study. I come home and eat, and go back to the shop. Then I come back home at 7 or 8 PM, depending on the work. I do the homework I get from the flats, like multiplication and division, and then I sleep.” In August 2017, Ali attended the local government school for a brief period. Prior to that, he studied in his village before the family migrated to Noida. “I went to school in the village, from class two till three. Then everyone (his family) came to Noida, what will I do alone at home? So I also came. We came here four or five years ago, and went to the Surkha school. Me and my sister used to go to the same school, but where we used to sit, the kids were very bad. They would take my things and say abuses. If I told the monitor, he would do nothing. I still went for two-three days, but then I left.” As a 12 year old, Ali should ideally be adept at reading and writing, but he is still learning the basics. Until he is capable of being integrated into the mainstream education system in a sustainable manner, the daily classes at this centre and his tuition classes provide the necessary tools to eventually achieve this end. His dedication towards learning, in the face of the oddities of working life at a young age, is truly heartening to witness.

The Onset of Change

At the My Community side office at Sector 18, Noida; Pihu* and Aanchal* are seated in front, and have showcased their drawing to Saurabh sir. He praises their work, and they beam with joy. It is indeed a beautiful drawing. They have portrayed the Hindu deities Ram and Sita, because that was the theme of today’s drawing class. They blush and giggle as their work is showcased, “We draw, whenever sir asks us to,” says Aanchal. She and Pihu seem joint at the hip, but they’re not sisters, simply close friends who have only recently started attending classes at the centre together. Says Aanchal, “My mummy works in Cambridge school, she makes food and sweeps the floors. I go there when I go to give mummy lunch. I make the lunch at 6:30 AM, mummy leaves at 8:30. I go to give her lunch at 4 PM. She returns at 5:30 PM. When we first came to Noida, papa used to make buildings. One year ago, he passed away. He fell off while working.” Since the passing of her father, Aanchal and her siblings have had to make adjustments to make ends meet. “My elder sister, she’s 14, goes to work. She packages things that the aunty in the *kothi* (house) in Sector 19 makes and sells. I have younger brothers, but they don’t go to school because ma’am told them also not to come. That’s why we don’t go. I used to study in class five, I really liked it. I was in school for five years. You know, we had so

many teachers, we had five of them. They all used to teach us different things—English, Hindi, Maths. And on Saturdays, one ma'am used to come to teach us drawing. When we made the drawing, we got a prize. All four of us brothers and sisters used to go to school. But our papers were going on, and we used to not study in class, we used to mostly have fun, look away from the blackboard. After my father passed away, we all went to the village. We stayed there for one month. When we came back, ma'am scolded us a lot, that we should at least have told her before going to the village. I used to feel like going, but I didn't like that school. We used to learn ABCD, even in class five. Even mummy used to tell me to go, but I said no. Then Neha *didi* (CHETNA staff member) came and asked if I go to school. I said, 'No, I've stopped going.' She said, 'Do you want to study?', and I said yes. Then my friend told her to write my name, and she did. Since then, I haven't even taken one day off. It has been one week. I didn't even know that there is a centre here. It's about to be one year since I left school. When I see her (Pihu) going to school, I remember that yes, even I used to go to school like this. I want to go, because I want to study. I like studying English, but I don't know English. I like playing the most, like playing Ludo. Now, I know all of Sunday-Monday (days of the week), but I can't remember January (months of the year). I want to go to her (Pihu's) school. I went there when she went to get admission, but I didn't have a TC (Transfer Certificate)."



Pihu and Aanchal during drawing classes

Pihu, on the other hand, has had a uninterrupted academic life. She currently attends secondary school, having successfully completed her primary schooling. She thinks Aanchal doesn't need a TC to gain admission. "Even I got my admission done with the result card, not the TC. Then I asked ma'am for my TC later and she gave it. I used to study in her school (Aanchal's previous school) earlier, but that school is only till fifth grade. Now I'm in class six. I got my admission done (in secondary school) in May, I think. We have nine classes, and there are grades from sixth to eighth. I really like it, because of the ma'am there, and they teach us nice things. We have seven subjects. I go everyday, but sometimes I take a holiday, like today I was late because I couldn't find an auto in the morning, so I didn't go. There are around 60-70 kids in my class." Her continued engagement at school is due to her stable domestic environment, which does not require her to contribute financially to the family. "We are two brothers, three sisters, Mummy and Papa. Papa cleans roads, but with a private (company). Mummy goes to a shop to do *jhaadu-pocha* (cleaning). My sister is elder, in class eight, and my brother is the eldest, he's around 18; he has a job now. He studied till fifth grade. He does some work at the mall. The other two are younger. I used to study in class one, but then we moved away, 30 minutes away from here. The school became too far to walk to, so I must not have gone to school for three or four months. Then, I told my parents that I will not live here, I said, 'I don't feel good here, I will stay with my *daadi* (paternal grandmother), but not live here.' There was a jungle there, so I didn't like it. This is a city, and there were just two or three homes over there, so I didn't feel good. Then, my father moved back here. My *daadi* got my admission done again. We got my admission done in class two. There are many advantages of going to school, like we can study, we can get a job, we can speak to people. I play football and everything."

Pihu attends school regularly, but also attends remedial classes at the centre. "(After school,) I eat food, and then I come to tuition, so I can learn something here also. I reach here by 3:30 PM, because it takes time to eat food, get ready. I stay here till 5:30, or sometimes till 5. Sir tells us to do homework, and we ask him questions that we don't understand, and he tells us how to solve it. If we can't, then he marks it wrong; if it's right, he marks it right. If it's wrong he have to do it again. I must have been coming here for a week, she (Aanchal) told me about it. I go home and cook food, and then there's no work. Then, I study a bit, do school work—whatever ma'am asks us to memorise, or complete my homework. Then we eat and go to sleep."

In contrast, Aanchal's daily routine is far more hectic. "I wake up at 6:30, then wash my face and hands, then wake up mummy, and she goes to cook food at a house till 7 AM, and then again at 6 PM, till 8 PM. I turn on the motor and fill water. Then I cook food. My mummy really likes the food I cook. Then I wash utensils, clothes, clean the house. Then I go to work, at the market nearby. I cook food at a woman's house, which is in the market. I reach by 9:30 AM, and come back at 10-11, or sometimes 2 or 3 PM, because she has a baby and I like playing with him—because he's so cute! Then I get ready for tuition (the My Community centre), tie my hair, come here by 3 PM, stay till 5:30 PM. Saurabh sir makes us do drawing, and he teaches us, and Neha *didi* teaches us English. I really like coming here, because they teach us so nicely that whatever they teach goes inside my head. Then I cook food at home. I go to work (again) at 7 PM, knead the dough, cut the vegetables, make rotis, sweep the floors. I don't like it, because I have to wash utensils, make food, and doing that work daily...but my mummy says that I should work, and study here; or I can go to school. But I don't feel good going to school. Whenever she sends me, she sends me to that same school again. I can't pay attention, and I don't do well in the papers because I can't write well, and ma'am (school teacher) used to scold me. Then, I used to make a greeting card for her. In which I would write 'I'm sorry ma'am you were scolded because of me', because the principal scolds here (when the class does not perform well). My ma'am is very nice. I return from work by 8:30 PM. After I come home, I eat food, then go to the terrace but mummy doesn't let me sleep on the terrace, and then I sleep at home."

With the initial target of engaging 700 street connected children to eventually mainstream as many of them as possible, the project in its first year successfully engaged 700 children and mainstreamed 102 of them. In April 2018, the project was renewed in partnership with HCL Foundation and aims to engage 1500 children by April 2019.

While Aanchal, like many other children her age, continues to work; the centre provides a necessary diversion in her life. The staff here intends to bring about a significant impact in the lives of children like Aanchal, who have limited access to education and other opportunities. By intervening at the critical point of childhood or early adolescence, the My Community project integrates children into the mainstream education system through a variety of customised approaches. This, coupled with the enthusiasm and effort of the children and staff together, is what makes the project a success. Perhaps the most rewarding and encouraging impact of this work has been the sustained change in the mindset of parents, with the result that many children engaged by the project have stopped going to work and have chosen to direct their primary focus towards academics.

*Names have been changed to ensure anonymity