

Pause; Rewind; Restart

At Sector 74 in Noida, a slight turn to the right transports one from urban civilisation to a barren, abandoned patch of land. For the community of migrants that inhabits this neglected space, it is a temporary abode. Two months ago, the entire community shifted base from the slum they had previously settled. The makeshift tents that now shelter them—wide, dusty rags fitted over wooden stilts—are scattered across the arid ground. Beneath the shade of a



parapet, 12 year old Pihu* stands facing her family-run shop. Until two months ago, she was a bright student regularly attending her third grade classes, “I liked going to school, but I left because it’s very far now (after they were displaced from the previous slum). I don’t feel like going there anymore. I do work at home—wash utensils, sweep the floor. I went to school for two months. Now, I take care of my nephew at home,” she remarks. She didn’t leave school due to any issues in the academic environment, but for the simple reason that the school she was previously enrolled in is not in the vicinity of her new abode.

She was first engaged by CHETNA’s My Community project in Noida (in partnership with HCL Foundation) in August 2017, “When I was 10 years old, ma’am used to come to the slum and teach us. We went to Akshardham temple, I really liked it, and I said thank you to sir. This other time we visited India Gate with my friends, all of them came. I’ve also played *kabaddi* at HCL!” Pihu’s academic life was abruptly halted after her community was displaced from their previous dwelling. She recalls her life prior to that with ease, “Our school teacher was good. I used to take many kids with me to school, together. I was the leader of all the kids at the (My Community project) centre. I liked it better, because we used to study.”

Pihu’s father, who is patiently listening to her testimony, elaborates on the helpless predicament of the displaced—“That land (their previous slum) belonged to a company (a real estate development corporation). They told us to empty it, otherwise they would break the slum—” Pihu interrupts, “They said they would set fire to everything.”—He continues, “So, we took all our belongings

and came here.” ‘Here’ is an area that lacks access to basic amenities such as sanitation and clean water, in addition to the extremely unhygienic surroundings the children and adults now inhabit. Beside the family’s small shop lies an open dump yard, where many residents sort through garbage to earn a living. Pihu, too, admits that she used to be one of them, “Earlier, I used to do a lot of rag picking. I was there from 8 AM to 5 PM. I used to go for the money. I earned ₹6000-₹7000 a month. I sorted plastic, cardboard, iron, glass bottles, and then sold it to the scrap dealer.”

Once the CHETNA staff understands that she no longer goes to school and has not even retained the basic knowledge that she could once instinctively recite, they communicate with her parents and kickstart the process of addressing her most urgent requirement—regaining access to the education system. The Project coordinator for My Community project, Noida, explains the reason behind Pihu’s current state of distress, “Pihu was regularly attending school, until her mother told her to start rag picking. She will not admit this, but she still sorts through garbage. Her parents also feel scared due to the language barrier. They say, ‘They (teachers in school) don’t speak our language, so we are scared of sending the kids to school.’ Pihu is ashamed of saying that she’s a rag picker. Kids at school used to tease her because she picks through garbage. Parents are very ignorant regarding education. Because she works, she does not go to school.”

Pihu’s story must be deeply understood. She is a child of migrant family, shifting from one decrepit landscape to another, struggling to gain access to education. Her circumstances do not foster the stable domestic and academic atmosphere that is essential for a child’s holistic development. It must also be acknowledged that Pihu is one among many such children. If she and her family were to break through this pattern of administrative neglect and systemic social oppression, she would be the exception, not the rule. In the absence of inclusive policy framework and implementation, she is a victim of the very system that ought to safeguard her rights.

Fortunately, the presence of grassroots NGOs like CHETNA allows for children like her to be identified, and their specific needs to be addressed in a manner that is customised to accommodate the limitations of their unique lifestyle. The staff negotiates with her parents. CHETNA already holds regular classes at a short distance from Pihu’s new abode, but her parents feel it is too far a distance for her to cover everyday. After some convincing, they agree to send her for the classes at least two-three times a week, for her own benefit. As they did before, the staff will now endeavour to restart from square one, to bring Pihu back to herself.

***Name has been changed to protect anonymity**