

## Resurrecting a Disillusioned Learner

At Sapno Ka Aangan (Courtyard of Dreams)—CHETNA's day care centre at Nizamuddin in Delhi, established in partnership with iPartner India—12-year-old Kavita\* walks authoritatively through the rows of seated children assembled for lunch this afternoon. She hands a plate of *daal-chawal* (rice and lentils) to each child, one at a time. Before they commence eating, she conducts a prayer. They recite after her—"Thank you God-for-healthy-and-tasty-food". Among the oldest here (the centre specifically aims to benefit children aged 6 to 12), she has been assigned the duties of the 'leader' at the centre. Throughout lunch, she monitors and reprimands kids her age and younger, and surprisingly, the typically unruly bunch do behave under her supervision. Later, once the younger kids are seated inside their classroom for the daily lessons, Kavita smiles through most of our conversation. She enthusiastically discusses her family structure, "I have two mummies, one papa and seven sisters. Three of us are of the same age. Right now, five of them don't go to school. Two are my age, but they're in the village so they don't study. Three of us live in Delhi. I live in Nagli, Razapur (the area where the centre is located). One mummy of mine lives in the village. She is my stepmother. Papa works at the (Nizamuddin) station. He goes at 3 AM and returns at 9 or 10 AM, and then he stays at home—because it's very sunny outside. Earlier we used to live in Aligarh. Papa used to drive a rickshaw there. Then we went to the village when I was seven years old, because my *Mama* (uncle) took me there, and then *Nana* (maternal grandfather) gave us the house, and we started to live there. We stayed in the village for five years. My village is a little further from Patna. Now, it's been two years since we came to Delhi."

While in the village, Kavita made earnest attempts towards seeking education, which were met with no support from the lax education system, "I studied from first to fifth class in the village, and then my father brought me to Delhi. In the village, the teachers didn't make us study. They would just talk to each other. Now, I really like studying. There, when I used to ask the teachers to give us some work, they would hit me. Here, even if we don't complete our work, ma'am makes us understand lovingly. I've been studying since three months (in school). In the village, the sirs (teachers) would answer our question papers themselves." While her teachers in the village would conveniently fill out the students' answer sheets during examinations, she experiences a contrasting academic culture in the city. Of her school examinations, she says, "I like exams, everyone sits together, and our teacher walks through the lines to see if anyone is cheating."

Disillusioned by the education system, she was not keen to pursue studies upon migrating to Delhi; "We came to Delhi during Ramzan, two years ago. I started coming to the centre, and I didn't like it at first, because I didn't even like studying in the village. So, I used to take care of my sisters at home. Then, a few days later, I felt I should also study, not just stay at home. I started coming here, and ma'am told me to bring my mother, but my mother used to be at work, so I told her my father could come. My father came, and they wrote my name in OBE (Open Basic Education system). I used to like it. Pooja ma'am used to teach us. I would go from 10 AM to 12 PM and then I used to come back to the centre. I used to look at other kids going out to study, and I would feel strange sitting at

home. There was nobody at home; I just sat alone, taking care of my sisters. I thought everyone goes to school, so it would be nice if I went too. So, I started coming to the centre (regularly). My cousin told me about the centre, that I should come, and studies happen here. When I came, ma'am asked me 'What do you know?' I said I don't know the Hindi alphabet, but I know ABCD. She told me to read from the board, and then she made my file after a few days (each child's progress is tracked through detailed files maintained by the centre staff). All the work we do—drawing, counting and all—is in that file. We used to eat lunch, play a little, and then ma'am would teach us." Eventually, after sufficient engagement through OBE, Kavita was considered fit to enroll in school. "I was telling papa that I want to study in school, but he said that I don't have an Aadhaar card (ID proof). So, *didi* (centre staff) took me to file the affidavit, and then I told him that *didi* would make an affidavit. I said it costs ₹100, and papa said that it's good that I'm enrolled in school now. Now, I like school better. In OBE, *didi* used to give other types of papers. The papers are different in school."

Alongside the transformation in her perspective towards education, her parents' attitude towards her academic engagement has also witnessed a significant change, ever since CHETNA's intervention. Says Kavita, "I used to stay at home, and make food for papa when he used to come home. The neighbor also told Papa to send me to school, but he would not send me far away. So, she said it (the centre) is right here. Then he came to the centre, and when mummy found out that I study, she also took an off from work and came here. Even when we have to go out somewhere (for exposure visits), they make papa sit at the parents meeting and tell him that he only has to drop me till here, and they'll bring me back. They (centre staff) take us to the park, or to India gate, wherever someone wants to go. Like now we have told *didi* that we want to go somewhere that has water, like near a water body. So, she's looking for a place with water. Now, if we tell papa that we don't feel like going to school today, he tells us that we must go." This change in her parents' attitude is the result of regular engagement through parents meetings and counseling by the staff working at the centre, who often have to convince parents to allow their children to visit the centre, even for a few hours a day.

As the leader at this centre, Kavita exercises her initiative by motivating other kids here, "I used to come here, and whatever I knew, I used to teach it to other children. Ma'am liked it, and thought I should be a leader. So the kids would be shouting when ma'am went to eat lunch. I used to make them all sit and play a game, or make them study. I liked it. I could make them all sit in one place and study. I liked becoming the leader because all the kids listen to me here. Now, the kids from the centre who have gone to school, I tell them to stay quiet (when she encounters them at school)." While she is a leader at the centre, she does not hold the same authority at home. Kavita has been a working child for almost a year now. She was initiated into this while accompanying her mother to work, as a domestic worker, "I started working when I was 11 years old. I didn't feel like working outside, I'm fine with working at home. Even when I used to go with mummy, she used to say she'll just make the food and all, and I should do the *jhaadu-pocha* (sweeping the floors). I used to not like it; I'd ask mummy, 'Why should I do it?' Still, I did it. Because I thought, 'Who will do this work if mummy

falls ill?' Mummy used to work in this building, and I used to work in the next one," she says, pointing to a building adjacent to the centre, "When I didn't go to school, I used to go (to work) everyday. I didn't get tired, because I used to think it's better to work with mummy than stay at home. During the (summer) vacations, I used to go to school from 7 AM to 10 AM (for remedial classes), and after I returned home I'd go for work. Now, I can't do it (since the vacations are over). When I have a holiday from school, I do it."

While she started by assisting her mother at the various homes she worked at, she eventually started going to work at houses by herself; "My papa was in the village for two months, and Muskaan *didi* (her employer) was new and she would ask me for help and ask me to get her things. She used to ask my mother to work at her house, so maybe mummy said yes or no. Then I went and she would give me the keys and I used to make the beds, fill water, and clean the floors. It used to take just 15-20 minutes. I went only once a day. When she used to come back, she would ask me to count her money. She used to collect money and ask me to count it for her. She used to not understand how much it was, when she earned a lot during the day. She used to go to the station and get the money, I don't know how." Her former employer was a *kinnar* (person belonging to the third sex) who would collect money at the nearby Nizamuddin station, presumably through begging. Kavita adds, "We used to sleep in her home. I don't remember for how long. When she didn't earn much money, she would say, 'I won't give you much work today'. I worked there for three months, and then one day she came with another woman, and said that now this woman will work here. That's the only time she shouted at me. Now, she's gone back to the village, without paying rent to the landlord!"



In spite of the hurdles she admits to have encountered, Kavita acknowledges her transformation in retrospect, “Now, I feel very good. Earlier, I felt everything was bad. Now, I study. *Bhaiya-didi* (centre staff) teach us, and show us that if something bad is happening, it is not right. So, even if we jokingly say that we don’t like coming to the centre, *didi* says that it is nothing to joke about. Then we come the next day, and *didi* asks, ‘What did I explain to you yesterday?’” she giggles, “In the village, I didn’t even bathe properly, and now I remain clean. *Bhaiya-didi* say that we should bathe and remain clean everyday, so I stay like that. I used to speak rudely to elders and younger people, I even used to abuse them; but *didi* said I should not do that, and now I don't do any of that. I speak nicely to people. Earlier I didn’t study or listen to anyone, but now I listen to mummy when she says something. I even switch off the TV at home when my (younger) sister is watching it, and she says ‘I don't like to study’, but I tell her that studies are what you should like. My little sister is in class three. She’s eight, now she’s about to turn nine.” Kavita’s transformation is inspiring. From being completely disconnected with education to now acting as a catalyst for younger children to devote more time towards academics, her example demonstrates how children can and must be reintegrated into the education system, with timely intervention and support to guide them through this demanding journey.

Since Kavita now spends the majority of her time at school and the remainder of the day at the centre, she is no longer under pressure to work, except on holidays or during vacations. Now, most of her days are dedicated towards study and play, as they ought to be. “I wake up at 6 AM, take my bottle of water, I brush and go to the park to do yoga; I do it alone, whatever (exercises) they have taught us at the centre. I come back at 6:30, and bathe and get ready by 7 AM, and then school opens at 8 AM. First we say good morning, then ma’am asks us to sit, takes attendance, then says ‘You can all play and talk for a bit and then we will study’. Then we study, eat lunch, study English and then Math, and then we talk a bit; and then ma’am says, ‘You can't talk now, because I gave you time to talk earlier’. Then, I come home (by 1 PM), change clothes, and then do the work mummy gives—like wash the utensils if I want to. I go nearby to study Urdu, and then reach the centre by 2:30-3:00 PM. I do the work that ma’am gives, and sir teaches us for two-three hours. Then they tell us we can play and eat food. After that, ma’am says we can choose to stay and study, draw or go home. If kids want to play, she lets them. We leave sometimes at 4:30 PM, sometimes at 5 PM. I go home, and then I play with *babu* (her sister), she’s just one year old. When the winter is about to end, she will turn two. Then, I ask mummy if I can wash the utensils. She says that I can if I want to, or play with *babu*. My younger sister does *jhaadu* (sweeping); I do *pocha* (mopping). Then I take *babu* for a walk, for 10 minutes. Then mummy makes food, and we study. We sleep at 10 PM, even if we eat late. But even after mummy and all sleep, I stay awake and hum songs, play *antakhari* (sing songs) with myself! My fan gives such cold air at night. When I feel too cold, I put a blanket over my head. I keep playing and stuff at night. If mummy asks, I tell her I’m swatting flies, not clapping my hands!” She beams with joy as she recounts her midnight adventures, and seems ecstatic whenever she mentions *babu*.

In some ways, the Sapno ka Aangan centre serves as a sanctuary to the children it hosts. It provides enriching experiences in a secure environment, and a diversion from the possibility of a working childhood. While Kavita does enjoy her time at home, she prioritizes her time at school and the centre. Kavita concludes, “I don’t feel like leaving the centre, I don’t even feel like going home. Mummy sometimes tells me not to come here, or I get a thought that I shouldn’t come; but then I remember—what will I do sitting at home? I like school and the centre better than home, because more studies happen here.” After the children have been dismissed at the end of the day, Kavita is seated on the entryway of a home opposite the centre, cradling *babu* in her arms, trying to put her to sleep. Her home, it turns out, is five steps away from the centre. She lives only five steps away from her sanctuary. Kavita and *babu*—her dearest object of affection—are both clearly in safe hands.

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