

Building a Brighter Future

Making education more accessible for children isolated from the education system



Since 2016, the Sapno ka Aangan centre—established by CHETNA in partnership with iPartner India—has served as a day care well-being centre for children aged six to 12 living in the Nizamuddin area of New Delhi. With limited or no access to education, these children are often engaged in child labour in the vicinity. By mobilising families, changing mindsets, and forging strong bonds with vulnerable kids, the purpose of the centre is to draw them away from an adverse environment and towards academic pursuits. Through various incentives and genuine interactions, the centre achieves this goal by providing alternative education, remedial classes, and a range of activities to ensure holistic development and sustainable progress.



Childhood Enhancement Through Training and Action

Celebrating
10
Years



A Guiding Light



At 11 AM in the Sapno ka Aangan (Courtyard of Dreams) centre in Nizamuddin, a morning prayer by the children is followed by a recitation of the national anthem, and ensuing declarations of 'Bharat maata ki jai!' Once the children are seated, their teacher, Ms. Pratibha, begins a regular activity called 'Parts of the Body'—the kids point to the part of the body being called out by the teacher at the centre —“Mouth, Knee, Ears, Head, Nose...” This is followed by a round of

introductions. Although all the kids are known to each other and to the teachers, this activity enables them to develop a vocabulary to introduce themselves to others, when required. “*Aap sabhi ko namaste* (Namaste to all).” “Where do you live?”, prompts Pratibha, “My name is ... I study in class ...” “Where do you live?”, another prompt, “I live in Sarai Kale Khan”, says a young boy with his hands on his waist—“Keep your hands by your side, speak properly”, says the domestic help at the centre. He does the needful and the introductions continue, till the last of the 25 odd children gathered on this Friday morning at the centre has participated. They have an off day at school today, so most of them have come to the centre this morning. Their notebooks, assigned by name, are distributed amongst them and attendance is marked. Today, before regular classes begin, the children are being taught to distinguish between ‘Good touch’ and ‘Bad touch’, through a discussion and demonstration using visual aids and videos. The purpose of this is to create awareness and establish preventative mechanisms against child sexual harassment. The children are responsive to this knowledge and are aware of the Child Line service that comes to their aid in emergency situations.

Amidst these children is 10-year-old Riddhima*. She has been a regular beneficiary at the centre—now successfully enrolled and retained in the local government school. “I’ve been going to school for 3 months now. I go at 7:30 in the morning and stay till 1 PM. I study in class four. I like school, because you study there, get to play. I’ve been coming to the centre since a few years, from when I was 7-8 years old. I started coming here myself, because all the kids used to come, and I followed them here. Then they wrote my name.” When Riddhima had not been enrolled to school, she would spend her entire day at the centre, learning basic concepts in English, Hindi, and Mathematics, in order to enable her to cope with the fourth standard school curriculum. “Earlier, I would come to the centre at 10 AM and leave 5 PM. We used to study, and play. Initially, I used to come here sometimes, then I started coming everyday because all my friends come here. In the winters, we get jackets, and the kids who go to school get bags.”

Before she was engaged by the centre staff, Riddhima was one amongst the many working children in the Sarai Kale Khan area. “I used to stay at home (when the centre was not yet established). Sometimes I would go to collect water, take care of my younger sister, wash utensils. I used to sometimes go to the station to collect bottles, and sell it to the scrap dealer. I didn’t like it much. My sister also used to go. Mummy didn’t work then, so she used to send me to collect bottles. I used to earn ₹100-₹200 and give it to mummy. Now I go sometimes, when I feel like going. I go once a week. Nobody goes there (to collect bottles at the station) now, so I don’t like going. Earlier, many of us girls used to go together.”

In contrast, she now spends the majority of her day engaging with education by regularly attending school, as well as the daily remedial classes for school-going children at the Sapno ka Aangan centre. “When I take an off from school, I come to the centre. (After she returns home from school) I change my clothes, take off my bag, and come to the centre. We pray, then eat lunch, we get *kadhi chaawal*, *rajma chawal*, *roti-sabzi*, *daal-chawal* (food provided by the centre). I like *kadhi chawal* the best. Then we study Hindi and English till four or five in the evening.” Riddhima’s father is a labourer, and her mother is a domestic worker. In order to support her parents and six siblings, she was directed to work by her parents. The centre staff had to consistently counsel her parents in order to convince them, to allow her to be enrolled in school. She was finally enrolled in 2018, and has been regularly attending school ever since.

The journey of most children here mirror each other. Hailing from impoverished backgrounds, they have either had irregular or no access to mainstream education. In such a scenario, it becomes essential to mobilise parents as well as children by creating a bond of trust with the NGO. Ms. Iram Naz, Project Coordinator for Sapno ka Aangan, explains the purpose of the centre, “This is a day care well being centre for street and working children, which covers education and recreational activities such as art and craft, dance, sport activities. It was established in 2016. 60-70 children (aged six to 12 years) visit the centre everyday, across both shifts (morning and afternoon).

The children in the first shift are all in alternative education, which prepares them to be enrolled to school in the next academic year. The second shift is remedial classes for those who are going to school.” She highlights the myriad challenges that the staff encounters in successfully engaging the children of the area. “During outreach, the main challenge is the parents, because some are motivated, and others are not bothered about where their children are going. So, their perspective is that the child can beg for an hour instead of going to the centre. Most of their parents beggars or scrap collectors. The parents want the children to work even if they are coming to the centre. After counselling, they will agree to send their kids for at least one hour a day. After the child begins coming regularly for an hour, they build a habit and that gradually increases to three or four hours. Eventually, they will remain here for the full day and return home by 5 or 6 PM. The children are safer within the centre in comparison to the outside world. While they’re at the centre, they are not exposed to substance abuse or an abusive environment. If a child wishes to stay for a long period, they can. We also have the example that some parents will pick up and drop the kids themselves, because they want the children to remain away from that (threatening) environment. It takes some time, because their environment does not permit a drastic change. The change comes gradually.”

In addition to providing a secure environment, activities at the centre also aim to divert children away from child labour. Says Iram, “Most of the children are working—either begging, picking bottles, selling balloons or rag picking. Few are not working. Some children have completely stopped working (since they were regularly engaged at the centre). But even if the working hours can be reduced from six or seven hours to one hour, because they spend their day at the centre, that is a big achievement.” For many children who are regular attendees at the centre, academics has not been prioritised in the domestic environment. Hence, they struggle to adjust to the discipline of learning—“They don’t have a high concentration span, so we have to keep changing the activities, and they do not listen when they are in groups. So, we cannot hold their attention for a very long time. In schools, the government rule says that the child has to be admitted according to their age. So, if the child has never received formal education before, they cannot cope with the curriculum at school. The idea is to mainstream as many children as possible, so they can be retained in school. So, we have to teach them the basics, as well as ensure that they are up to date with school work. If this does not happen, they are at risk of getting into substance abuse.”

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IRAM NAZ, PROJECT COORDINATOR



Children praying during lunch service at the centre

Following the morning session, there is a discussion regarding *Badhte Kadam*, a federation of more than 12,000 children, consolidated by CHETNA, which seeks to empower street and working children. For each activity at the centre, a peer interaction system is implemented. In order to underline each learning, a child picked at random from the group of children explains the topic to their peers at the centre. As the children settle down for lunch, which ensures sufficient nutrition to meet their needs, one among them distributes the platters and repeatedly ensures that her fellows are quiet throughout the lunch break. The

girl with the high pitched voice, exclaiming, “Do you all know anything except how to talk!? Now fold your hands, and sit down. Nobody’s eyes should be open; quickly now! You’re so old, but you behave like little kids!”—this is 12 year old Kavita*. The other children repeat after her, “Thank you God—for—giving—tasty—and—healthy—food—Thank you God!” They chant once, and commence eating.

As the monitor/ leader at the centre, Kavita is assigned the essential task of ensuring that each child’s hands are sanitised before they eat lunch. As the younger children form a long queue, she calls to each one at a time, squeezes liquid soap into their hands, and then leads their hands to the tap beside the washroom. Rise, lather, repeat. Once she has fulfilled her duties and eaten her lunch, she articulately shares her experience at the centre, “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 they wrote my name in OBE (Open Basic Education system). I used to like it. Pooja ma’am used to teach us. I would to 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 be enrolled 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* took me to fill the affidavit, and then I told him that *didi* will 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.”

Kavita also exercises her initiative by motivating other kids at the centre, “I used to come here, and whatever I knew, I used to teach 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 they’re at school together).” 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—a domestic helper—to work. “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 everyday. I didn't get tired, because I used to think its 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 (because the vacations are over). When I have a holiday from school, I do it."

Inspite of the hurdles she admits having 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. 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 say abuses to 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." Kavita's transformation is inspiring. From being completely disconnected from 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

"Now, I study, *bhaiya-didi* (centre staff) teach us, and show us that if something bad is happening, it is not right. They say that we should bathe and remain clean everyday, so I stay like that."

KAVITA, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

The Dream Factory

Post lunch, the children gather for their daily lessons. They recite from their books, finish activities in their notebooks, and are all too keen to animatedly recite poems. One of them, however, is very quiet. This is Ismail*. He is reserved, but opens up if you show interest. He regularly attends school, and visits the centre after school hours. "I study in 2nd grade. It's easy. I've been studying since a year. I've given many exams. School is nearby. Earlier, I used to study here (at the centre). I've been coming here since one or two years. One boy, as old as me, had told us about it. We asked people here, 'Where is the centre?' Everyone told me not to come because, they said, 'they will take you away'. When we came, *didi* asked us to sit, and I started coming here for two or three days, and then the kids who live with me started asking, 'Where do you go everyday?' I brought them along with me, and *didi* asked, 'Where did you get them from?' She wrote their names, their parents names, then a month later we started coming everyday. They started teaching, but the kids—some wanted to play *lattoo*, someone wanted to fly a kite, some used to go and beg. I just go to school and then come to the centre."

While going to school is a feasible option for Ismail, this is only because another child in the house has taken up the responsibilities that might otherwise have to be shared by him. "Only one of my younger sisters goes to school, the elder one takes care of everything—washing utensils, taking care of the kids." He dedicates most of his time towards studying. He now acknowledges the changes he has witnessed within himself, ever since he was engaged by the centre. "In the starting, ma'am told us to come here, and she gave me something to work on, but I couldn't write, and then she taught me how to write. When I came here, my father gave money to buy clothes, pens, notebooks. I told my father that, '*Didi* is calling you.' He came and spoke to her, and then I started going to school. Then, *didi* even got my sister's enrolled in school. My father tells us not to beg, but to study instead. Earlier, we didn't have money to send me to school. I come here to study. I study in school, and I study here too. I like studying here more. Here, *didi* doesn't hit us. In school, if we make a mistake, ma'am hits a lot, she scolds us. I don't wear a uniform to school. Papa says he will earn money and then buy a uniform. I eat at home and I eat here. Earlier, I used to just be quiet. Now that I come here, I play and have friends also."

Many children, like Ismail, have been provided an avenue for learning that has resulted in successful integration into the mainstream education system. However, there are also children who seek fulfilment of higher level needs at the centre. The staff at the centre ensures that these children are provided suitable platforms for self expression. By 4:30 PM, all the children have reassembled in the common area at the centre. The children are specially excited for the daily dance classes with their instructor. The instructor walks up to the front, facing them. They take their positions, and begin rehearsing a choreographed routine. This instructor is a 12 year old girl named Geeta*. She guides her peers through three dance routines and precisely demonstrates every movement. After wrapping up her class, she settles in to talk about her passion and how the centre helped her explore it. She has had a fairly standard academic trajectory. She was admitted to school at the age of four, and has consistently pursued her education, with adequate parental support. "I'm in class 8. I've been going to school for 8 years. I really like going to school," she smiles, "I've never worked. We learn new things everyday (at school), and if I want to make my dream come true, then I have to go to school." And what, precisely, is her dream? "Dance," she says, all bright and starry-eyed, "I started dancing when I was 10 years old. The first time I danced was in my village, at a wedding." Geeta does attend daily remedial classes at the centre, but what has proved even more impactful is the opportunity the engagement with this project has provided her with.

"Didi asked me, 'What is your dream?', and I said I want to be a dancer. She said, 'Everybody's dreams come true here.'"

GEETA, PROJECT BENEFICIARY

In order to encourage her inclination towards dance, the staff at the centre came up with the idea of asking her to teach dance to her peers regularly, several days a week. "I've been coming to the centre



Geeta's evening dance lessons in progress

for one month. Someone had told me that there's a centre here, and kids go there to learn new things. I wanted to see the centre. I came and saw kids dancing. Didi asked me, 'Do you know how to dance?' She asked me to show her, and I did. Then she asked me, 'What is your dream?', and I said I want to be a dancer. She said, 'Everybody's dreams come true here, and maybe you'll meet some people here who can help your dreams come true.' I started feeling good here, and saw that didi makes us play, teaches very well; we go out, paint, draw. I liked everything, and that's why I want to keep coming here."

And so, she has conducted her dance class today as well. Her talent is evident, and this platform shall ensure that she remains connected to this creative pursuit. "I like to dance to new songs, not the old ones. I teach kids dance at the centre, whenever the kids ask me to. *Bhaiya* (educator at the centre) told me to teach them dance whenever I get time from studying. I really like teaching dance to children. I also like to sing. Earlier I used to just keep playing around, but now I come here and so I study. When I used to be at home, I would just watch cartoons on TV and get bored. A week after I came here, *bhaiya* told me 'You're a nice dancer, can you teach them?' I said sure. When people come from outside, *didi* asks me to dance. My mummy-papa said, 'It's your dream, so you must make it come true.' Mummy said that in the next vacations, I can join a dance class." This is the fulfilment of needs beyond basic education and literacy, which each child deserves to explore. By identifying these

talents and promoting artistic expression, the centre aims to inculcate a sense of self actualisation and strength of conviction within the children.

Around 5 PM, when the children are beginning to make their way back home, Payal* obliges a request for an audience with her—on the condition that Kavita and Iram are present while she talks. She is reluctant at first, suspicious even; but once she begins, there's no stopping her. "I've just come from the station, then I came to meet ma'am. I go to the station everyday, sometimes at 4 PM or sometimes at 8 PM." Payal is among the many kids who beg along the platforms across the expansive Nizamuddin railway station in Delhi. She tries to evade talking about how she used to live prior to her engagement at the centre, but Iram encourages her—"Okay—fine, fine. Earlier I used to collect trash," she cups her mouth in her hands, and laughs, before continuing, "I used to be very dirty...used to only bathe sometimes...back then I used to come and bathe at the centre." Iram adds, "And now she bathes everyday, she comes to the centre clean. Now you even study, right?" Payal simply continues to smile. She lives at the local homeless shelter with her family, and has been attending school regularly since the past three months. Before she started going to school, she would spend the majority of her day at the centre. "When I didn't go to school, I used to come (to the centre) in the morning and stay till evening. Ma'am used to teach us poems. Now I wake up at 6, brush my teeth, and bathe. Papa gives us ₹10 and then we go to school. At 8:30 AM we have our prayer. After school ends at 1 PM, we go home and come to the centre after changing clothes. We eat here, then study. we stay till 4 or 5 PM. Then, we go home and turn on the TV or go to tuition nearby—we only go sometimes. Papa likes it when I come to the centre."



Payal, Project Beneficiary, on her way back from school

Payal also picks plastic bottles at the station and sells them to the local scrap dealer, which her family does not seem to prohibit, "Papa stops me from rag picking. Earlier, when my father didn't work, they would sometimes tell me to go for rag picking. We used to go to the station, to pick bottles. I used the money to eat, or give it to my father to save it. We used to go on alternate days. We used to go in the morning, around 8 AM and return at 4 PM. I had three friends—we used to eat as much as we wanted—and picked bottles together. We used to buy chips, *samosas* and all. I used to like it but after some time, when we started feeling dizzy, we would go back home. We felt dizzy because of the heat. We used to eat with our own money. My father would pick up garbage at the station, and on platform one. I used to go on platform 4, 5, and 7. On 7, there was a lot a crowd, so we used to go when there were a lot of people. At the station, there's always a train on either side. I used to feel scared sometimes, not other times."

While she continues to beg and work at the station, she simultaneously regularly attends school. She has been enrolled to school only through her own strong initiative, and the efforts of the staff at the Sapno ka Aangan centre. In order for Payal to be admitted to school, she would have required her family to pay a nominal amount towards filing an affidavit for admission and purchase a school dress for her. They did not support her in this process, which led Payal to take matters into her own hands. Iram explains, "She did not come to the centre for three consecutive days, and on the fourth day, she showed up with they money." Payal attempts to skim over this fact, but elaborates upon request. "I gave the money to Nisha ma'am—₹300. I collected it from rag picking. You collect bottles, then you compress them, then you sell them. I had to collect it for the (school) dress. Papa didn't have any work back then, so he gave me ₹ 50 and I put in ₹250. Then, sir (CHETNA staff) bought my dress—it

is white, blue, and green (she misinterprets the colour red as green). That's it. Papa didn't give money for my admission, so *didi* (CHETNA staff) got my name written." The staff at the centre contributed money towards Payal's affidavit, since her parents could not pay the amount. For a 10 year old girl who spends most of her time at the station to be resourceful enough to earn money the only way she knows how, and to save up and use that money for a new school uniform which nobody else would agree to provide to her; is nothing short of extraordinary.

Since 2016, the Sapno ka Aangan day care centre has provided non-formal education to children in the Nizamuddin area, and contributed towards creating a secure academic and recreational environment for them. For 2018-19, the project set a target of enrolling 40 children to the government school, which they surpassed by October 2018 itself. 50 children have been enrolled to the local government school, and follow up mechanisms aim to ensure retention. The centre also aimed to engage 100 children in the area during this period, and has exceeded this target by successfully engaging 150 children.

Through their sustained efforts, the staff at the Sapno ka Aangan centre has repeatedly achieved and exceeded set targets, by combatting oppressive ideologies and filling the gaps that persist in the education system. They have ensured that no child engaged by the centre is isolated from learning, nutrition and a nurturing academic environment. Iram elaborates on the holistic development approach that is followed to ensure sustainable impact amongst the children, "This year, we have included sports activities. We now have a sports cum outreach teacher, including indoor and outdoor activities. Another important aspect is nutritional supplement, for which we have a perfect daily menu. Apart from this, we provide clothes and shoes during winters, as well as hygiene kits twice a year to each child—containing soap, dettol, toothbrush, etc. We also have a daily outreach twice a day, morning and evening, sometimes even three times a day. The outreach covers the homeless shelter, railway station, and adjacent areas around the centre. We also provide exposure visits to children; and organise health camps on a quarterly basis. The health camp is to check their BMI, to know the impact of the nutrition we are providing, as well as to see their nutritional improvement and general check up, so that we can engage the child with secondary or tertiary hospitals for further treatment. These are the children who have not been exposed to the outside world (beyond their localities). So our motive is to take them to a place where they get exposure as well as knowledge (through exposure visits). Due to the outing, they will feel more fresh, and come to the centre more regularly. The creativity of the children is very important, as the children cannot constantly study since they have a low concentration span. We display the artwork of children throughout the centre, to encourage them. We also have monthly support group meetings because that is when they can share their problems and express their views. We organise life skill workshops on a monthly basis for awareness on child rights, Child Line, basic day to day things like environmental changes—the topics can vary. We also have monthly Parent Teacher Meetings which have the motive to increase parental involvement in their studies, so that their parents regularly send them to the centre or to school. We either have the meeting where they live, or at the centre, as per their convenience. We show the kids' files to the parents, so that they can check their progress and also be assured that the place their kids are visiting everyday is safe."

*Names have been changed to ensure anonymity