

The Scholar who owns a Tea Stall



At Badshahpur in Gurugram, an afternoon class is being conducted for some among the 60 kids who regularly seek informal education at this location. In the courtyard of a small temple, children have gathered after school hours, facing a makeshift chalkboard. This centre, one of two established by CHETNA in Gurugram—in partnership with Device Book Online Services Pvt. Ltd.—serves as a meeting ground for the most vulnerable children in these areas to learn and interact. At Badshahpur, there exist roughly 400 homes within the slums, populated largely by migrants from Bihar and Bengal.

Due to the poor financial status of the community, child labour is pervasive in the area. Minors are engaged in informal work environments at a young age, for various reasons. Some parents cannot leave their children at home alone, and cannot afford a day care facility. So, their children accompany them to work. Others have to turn breadwinners themselves. Raghu*, at 13, has already switched four jobs, “I started working at the *mandi* (vegetable market) first. I used to place the vegetables at a vendor’s stall and sell it. After that, I sold tea at a shop. Then, I started transporting cartons of Pepsi to various shops. I used to sit on the bike behind the man who used to supply the cartons. We’d take four or five cartons at a time. The money I earned from those jobs, I invested in building my own shop. I opened it on *Raksha Bandhan* (a Hindu festival) this year. I wanted to have my own shop because my employers used to shout at me and scold me. The nephew of the vegetable vendor used to hit me. He lives nearby, but he doesn’t bother me anymore.” He demonstrates how he

makes tea at his compact stall inside the slum, where other snacks and knick-knacks are also stocked.

Raghu manages his shop with his mother. His elder brothers aged 15 and 18, work as a clerk and a painter, respectively. The family's financial condition may have worsened after Raghu's father passed away four years ago. Perhaps owing to this, he was admitted to school only two weeks ago, in the fifth grade. How does a teenager juggle education with entrepreneurship? "In the morning, when I'm in school, my mother stays at the shop. We sell tea, chips, etc. I'm at the shop from 3 PM to 9 or 10 PM. When I get home, I study a little bit before sleeping. In my village, Chapra in Bihar, I studied till class 3. I was in school since Nursery, and I used to go for tuitions. We came here because we didn't have any work there." Recently, CHETNA organised an interaction with a police constable and an inspector, for the kids at the Badshahpur centre. Raghu speaks enthusiastically of the visit—"When the police officers came, I put garlands around their necks. I've been coming here since six or seven months." And what has he learnt? "I've learnt how to speak properly to elders, and not to use bad language." He still has to strike a fine balance between work and studies, although he clearly prefers one to the other— "I like studying more than the shop. I want to study, and become something."

Through CHETNA's intervention, Raghu has been able to continue his educational pursuit in an effort to create a secure future for himself and his family. His recent integration into the mainstream education system is evidence of the result of hard work and dedication showed by the organisation and the children themselves. The goal of this intervention is to ultimately establish a more balanced ecosystem for children to thrive, without being restricted by the challenging circumstances they are often forced to confront.

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