



# WORDS OF EXPERIENCE

Stories by children and  
teenagers who made an effort

Translation from Hindi to English:  
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Stories by children and  
teenagers who made an effort



Children's Participaion - Responsibility of Everyone



### **Those who tried**

Anamika / Anita / Abhishek/ Ankita / Usha /  
kalmani / kalita / kamini / gudiya / tarun /  
deepshikha / Divya / Namrata / Pushparaj / Priya  
/ babu / Basanti / Mehak / Mahima / Rakshanda  
/ Rudradhar / Vasurandhara / Shalu / Shivani /  
Shubhankar /Sandhya /Sneha / Sushmita

### **Those who accompanied:**

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## **Child Participation - Responsibility of All**

Joining Forces is an alliance of child rights, child centred six organisations from the world. While maintaining solidarity these organisations developed their own alliances in different countries. India is one of them known as Joining Forces for Children, India. Bal Raksha Bharat (Save the Children India), Child Fund India, Plan India, SOS Children's Village of India, Terre Des Hommes International Federation and World Vision India are part of this alliance. Joining Forces India organises several programmes where government, media, civil society, children, youth and well-wishers come together and have positive dialogue on Child Rights.

The alliance had no idea about the length and spread of this journey when it started its work in India around 6 years back on the issue of child rights. Today the alliance is active not only at the national level but has its units in 8 different states. The work started with review and publication of the report on child rights and organising campaigns on protection of children. Since last 2 years it has evolved into densely working with children and youth organisations on children's right to participation.

Leave alone putting child participation in practice, it is the least understood child right. This is not a project but an ongoing process. If not implemented well, the results could be even negative and not just weak. However, positive results are for sure if there is proper implementation. Last year this understanding got further strengthened during the workshops we had with children for preparing this booklet. This was discussed at length among the alliance which helped to develop a shared understanding.

This booklet on children's right to participation is the beginning of second encampment. Initially we had involved only those children with whom we were already working directly. We had workshops on the right to participate with children from 8 states where they got clear understanding about this right. They not only wrote about their experiences but came to Delhi and shared the experiences with adult and children in a round table conference. This year along with the 6 organisations from 9 states we have included children from other organisations as well. We could not reach out to children in person during the second phase because of some adverse conditions but the whole process was carried out online. This was not easy either to adults helping the children or to children themselves. In spite of this we could reach out to approximately 65 children from Assam, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Delhi.

We believe that this book is just a beginning. We have yet to decide about more ways of reaching out to more children. We have to complete some of the stories that have remained half - cooked. We want to translate this book for our children from different states who can speak and read.

We believe you all are with us in this effort. Come, let us appreciate children's stories...

Joining Forces for Children India National Coordination Committee

New Delhi



## **Creative Leadership** **Right to say and participate**



According to the 12th Article of UNCRC children have the right to frankly express their opinion and being heard of, on issues related to their life without any discrimination. Complete participation of children is mandatory in decision making as well as its implementation. Let it be family, school, community or larger society. While in their social Milieu they should have the right to ask questions and openly express their thoughts. At the same time they should get support while participating when they struggle with hurdles and challenges. Partnership between adults and children is necessary for making the world child friendly; may they be parents, community leaders, teachers, education officers, Government officers, elected representatives, state agencies or people from different civil societies. Right to participate is the foundation of remaining three rights namely: right to life, development and protection.

In continuation, the first thing we need to remember is that while carrying out daily processes and preparing programme framework, children and teenagers should be encouraged to participate and appreciated. Our language and behaviour should be child friendly. The advantage is that children and adolescents themselves will be equipped enough to manage the self-driven place we are trying to create. This will increase their sense of responsibility and they will become self-dependent. Together with adults they will share the responsibility of the place. In this situation the responsibility of the adults will be of just to guide and help. Secondly, the children and adolescents need to develop the habit of listening to others and also speaking for others. It is important for the adults associated with the programme to understand and limit their role to making suggestions and giving



guidance. This journey is from “ME” to “WE”. At the same time it is not that you lose yourself in the crowd of “WE”. In reality it is the search of “ME” among “WE”. To concretise this process children and teenagers have to develop capacity to listen to and get inspiration from the life stories of others. Slowly they started reading their stories to others and listeners started getting interested in the stories. This is not an artificial process. It is practice, an ongoing study that teaches one to listen-understand and to be able to comment. When the locality is also included in the scope of such ever-expanding dialogue, the speakers themselves become creators and storytellers. A kind of authority is created in their voices and their stories reach out to all types of listeners. Through these processes of participation, children and adolescents begin to better understand the world around them and can better express themselves not only in terms of the problems they face, but also based on their life experiences. They can propose new solutions and see what kinds of possibilities exist.

Many people are familiar with the concept of “child leadership”. Here children’s own thinking and abilities are given priority for their education and development. This approach recognizes that children are active and curious people, who have their own interests, needs and abilities and they learn more on their own. This approach emphasizes creating an environment in which children take charge of their own learning and development. They don’t remain mere silent participants in the programs sponsored, organized or directed by adults.

## **knitting**

No creation suddenly appears at once at all levels. The same thing is true in the context of children’s writings. For the first time, we get a glimpse of the creation, a possibility. Patience is needed to see and listen to this glimpse. Especially the creations of these writers require a new kind of ears. Ears so inquisitive, ears that listen to the consistent lines, embrace the expansion and possibility.

I did the same. I asked them some open ended questions for their stories. Open questions mean those questions where answers are

beyond 'yes' or 'no'. These are the questions that speak to your experience and draw a story out of it. This is the story that is being told, repeated and written for the first time. These stories are simmering somewhere, we sniff them out, dig them out. We convert the oral into written, but only through long practice.

We wrote, then narrated it, read it and sent it to the group on WhatsApp and then gave suggestions. Out of these suggestions, the writers adopted those which they found suitable and strengthened their stories. After that, their written stories were read again and then the readers gave some comments. Thus one more draft of each story was created.

Rewriting is a way to improve what you have written by looking carefully at it. Those things and situations which were left out while writing, they have to be given space. If there is lack of impact in the way of speaking, then that also has to be rectified.

While writing, we sit in our fort, we write only what we know; if we know the village then we will write only that, if we know the locality, then we will write only that, if we know the city then we will write only that. But writing is ultimately a journey to a foreign country. To go where we have not gone till now. One can become a writer only by challenging oneself and the society.

Similarly writing can also happen by entering in people's mind and imagining their ideas. A condition for writing is also to enter another person because one doesn't write just about ones own point of view, he also writes about the diversity of the entire society.

To that extent, every writer is a leader of the society he wants to write about. His written words carry his voice. Let us listen to these words and experiences, the leadership potential of these writers.

**Prabhat Kumar Jha**

New Delhi







## When Sadness Murmurs

Sanwari wakes up in the morning and studies. She helps with household chores and then gets ready to go to school. Her daily routine includes braiding, applying kajal and managing her hair. She finds her exercise books and keeps them in her bag and while looking at the watch she goes to school on her bicycle with her school bag. She draws and colors pictures in her free time. She mostly draws pictures of trees, plants, flowers and forests etc. She also likes Kabaddi, badminton and running. When she gets time, she also likes to gossip with her friends.

There is also a government school, post office and bank in Sanwari's village. The cleaning there is done by the village employees. The village has fruit trees like plum, amla, mango, barari, honey and guava. A river also flows near the village. The villagers use river water to irrigate their fields. There is also dense forest around the village.

In Sanwari's village, there are other girls like Vimla, Kajal and Mala who are also going through a new phase of life full of anxiety. Sanwari herself was struggling with the same anxiety. She does not know anything about the changes taking place in her body. She went to some people and some places to find out why this was happening to her! She was shy to share her problems with her parents and siblings. She felt suffocated inside by not sharing her thoughts with anyone, and this was increasing problems. Similarly, Vimla, Kajal and Mala were also facing the same problems. They also did not know what changes occur in the body during adolescence. At what age does menstruation start and what should be done during that time? How does anemia occur? How to take care of personal hygiene? All these things are neither explained at home nor in the society. As a result,



these girls suffer from minor diseases which later turn into major diseases. They also feel shy to share their problems with the doctor.

Some people even explained these things to them at some places. After listening to those things, Sanwari understood things and started adopting them. After that she started giving advice to the girls around her. First of all she talked to Vimala and Kajal. These were those things which no one speaks openly to each other but girls tell them in whispers. Sanwari was listening to these whispers which no one had heard till now. When the girls were free, she would meet them. Initially Vimala and Mala felt very hesitant to talk about these things. They felt shy. To remove the hesitation of these girls, Sawari started talking to them through some incident by narrating a story.

She was sharing with the girls' groups what she had heard and learned through her group. Sanwari got sanitary boxes placed through the group so that girls could easily get sanitary pads. Once the money is collected, it is bought from the market and kept in this box so that the transaction is maintained. Most of the diseases in girls are caused because they use dirty clothes. Girls feel shy in asking for sanitary pads from the shopkeeper as mostly boys are there in the shop. Even if one of them asks for it, she brings it hidden in a scarf or black polythene.

The effect of all these things is that there has been a lot of change in the lifestyle, eating habits and speech of the girls. Influenced by each other, the girls have started talking to each other on issues like menstruation, hygiene and sexual reproduction, health, personal and community hygiene, balanced diet, anemia etc. They also use and safely dispose off sanitary pads themselves.

Sanwari has understood that if we listen to the whispers of these girls at the right time, then after some time we will see the girls humming around us. No sad murmurs.



## **Now There Is No Need To Buy Biscuits**

My village is in Chitrakut District of the state of Uttar Pradesh. Here overall atmosphere is very serene and quiet. People in my village rear cows, buffaloes, goats and such animals at home from whom they get milk, curd, pure ghee, and buttermilk. On it's consumption at home; they sell out remaining extra milk. They also sell their goats. During evenings, all family members get together to relish their dinner. As the night falls, and we children feel sleepy, our grandmother narrates to us many stories and anecdotes. Our village has good agricultural produce of grains such as wheat, pulses, rice, bajra, jowar and mustard etc.

When I was studying in Eighth standard in school in my village, my friends were studying in the government higher secondary school. When I used to see them, I also felt like joining them. One evening I requested my father to enroll me in the government higher secondary school and buy one bicycle for me. I said I want to attend that school along with my friends. Knowing my desire, my father purchased one bicycle for me and arranged my admission in Ninth standard in the government higher secondary school. Thus I continued my education with my friends.

'Child Protection Committee' meetings were held in our village Panchayat office every 3 months. Once I was asked to participate in the committee meeting by the Chairman of our village. I was very scared. The feeling of fear took complete hold of my mind. The Chief of the village asked, "Are you scared?" I could not answer as my throat was choked with fear. I felt like getting completely rid of the situation and run away from the scene. I also felt that the Sarpanch will not listen to any excuse and it will be compulsory for me to join the meeting. That day all the members of our village local body such as teachers of our school, volunteers of Anganwadi, were present for the meeting along

with the Secretary of the Administration office. All these people were coaxing me and told me that I will get toffee, sweet rasgullas (Bengali sweet), nice cookies and biscuits. I wondered whether these people were telling me a lie. However, we all were made to participate in the meeting. As the meeting was over, everybody got sweets and biscuits, which meant it was not a lie. My uncle got sweets and I too got sweets and biscuits.

There after I continued to attend the meetings of the 'Child Protection Committee ' regularly. My father too used to join these meetings. Once he told me, "If you attend these meetings, you will get information and knowledge about child marriage, child kidnapping and child labour etc. Then nobody will be able to take your disadvantage. You must understand all these things. That is why I ask you to attend these meetings."

Then I asked my father, " Father, what is meant by child protection? "Then he told me "Any individual below the age of 18 years is called a child and protection means safety. Therefore, child safety means protection of children and taking care of children. Some unknown person may cheat you for money and tells you that ' come on, I will give you 22 thousand rupees per month, you will get lured by the offer and you will be ready to go with him. You will think ' it is really great!' I will earn a lot of money and I will buy nice dresses to wear. You will get fooled by his sweet talk and you will join him. But afterwards he may ill treat you. He may remove your kidney, eyes, liver from your body and sell these parts. There won't be anybody to listen to you and help you. Such people will abuse you, beat you and will compel you to do hard work."

When my father told me this, I was very scared. Then I thought it is better to get educated first and attend 'Child Protection Meetings. 'Jitendra's uncle was also there and he said that this was the reason why we tell you to attend these meetings. By attending these meetings, you will understand so many things. Over and above, you will get sweets and biscuits after the meetings. On listening to all this I started attending the meetings regularly.



After some days, I started going to 'child safety meetings' without any attraction of biscuits and sweets. In those meetings, I got a lot of information. I also liked to attend the meetings with everyone. After a few days the village Chairman included my name as a member of the 'Child safety meeting'. I had an opportunity to participate as a member for the first time. In one of the meetings the village Chairman asked me to come on stage and say something if I wished.

Then I went and stood on the stage. All people who were present there clapped and welcomed me which made me very happy. Another day after my welcome, I shared my views. I said, "Friends, let us form a children's group in our village in which all the children will join. We will arrange a rally in our village for child safety and all uncles, aunties, brothers, and sisters will become aware about child safety. This will help all the people from our village to know about child rights.

After this I visited each and every house in the village and met children's parents. When I went to Raju's home, he was not there. His father asked me where I was going. I told him, "today I am organizing a rally on ' child safety ' in our village; therefore I am trying to gather children.'

Raju's father said that Raju has gone to market with his mother.

Then I said,' it is okay Uncle."

There after I visited other homes to see children and I organised a rally for child safety. In the beginning, children did not join. The parents said, ' Today Kailash cannot come as there is some work at home.' Somebody said 'what is the use of this? What is the benefit for my children?' I replied, "See, as it is the children are roaming here and there in the village. It is better for them if they join this rally where they will get necessary information. This will help to free our village from child abuse, child marriage and child labour. The way the village Chairman had involved me, I started involving more and more children from the village. Then I arranged the rally and distributed sweets among the children. All children went home very happily.



After a week, with help of the group members, I got all the children together. I explained to them what is child safety, child labour and child marriage - child labour means getting various types of work done by children by compulsion, terrorising children and to make them carry heavy blocks of stone. Child marriage means arranging child's marriage at an early tender age. It means when the children are studying in schools their father and mother discontinue their education and arrange their marriage. If the child works in cities and sends money to his / her parents, they think that ' my child is earning enough now, so now we have to get him married.' In this way child marriage takes place at an early age. That time the child is neither physically developed nor mentally matured. Then Vinay asked me, 'what is child kidnapping?'

Then I explained to Vinay that child kidnapping means selling children's body parts, making them beggars for getting money, sometimes injure child's one eye or one hand and leg for begging. Child kidnapping includes all types of harassment and sexual harassment of children, selling parts of their body. It also includes abusing both boy and girl children. It means abusing children in different ways. We can get necessary information about all this from village secretary's office or centre. In child marriage, our bodies get affected badly. We should get married at a proper age for marriage, after completing our education and only when we are able to support ourselves.

On listening to this Chandan asked, "What is the proper age of marriage?"

For girls the proper age of marriage is 18 and for boys it is 21 years. At this age the body and mind is fully developed. All the children who were present in the meeting listened to this information with keen interest. After this when I met parents of these children, they all appreciated my efforts. I felt very very happy.



## **Change Of Heart: Neither Easy Nor Impossible**

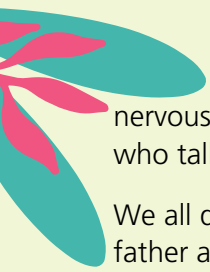
We girls are taught to ignore violence and abuse. I have been taught not to shy away from raising my voice against violence.

I am a youth reporter. I am going to share a story with you. Once a meeting was taking place in my locality. I was invited in that. I saw that there were many friends of my age. A group was being formed there. I joined the group. Later a youth club was formed. I became a member of that too. Together we named the group as “Star Youth Club”. By going there Together I got a chance to know and listen to new people. I came to know about my rights. I also learned what our rights are and that no one can trouble us.

Once my friend said to me that you attend the club meetings, I want to tell you something. I am very troubled by that matter. I asked to tell me. She told me that a boy had been harassing her for a long time. I asked her if she had told her Mom. She said I told my mother but Mom told her not to pay too much attention to this matter.

No one at home listens to my friend. Whenever all of us girls used to sit together in the evening and chat, she looked very restless. I asked her why she was so restless. She did not say anything but she had stopped attending school out of fear of that boy because he was sometimes found at the entrance of the street, sometimes on the road and sometimes near the school. She was very scared, so she stopped going to school. That boy used to follow her. Now she started looking very weak. Sadness was visible on her face. Black marks started appearing under the eyes. It seemed as if she had not slept properly for many nights.

Looking my friend’s problem, I felt that I should help her. We talked to her that evening. She was not able to explain things properly. She was



nervous. Our club mates met my friend. Ma'am was also in our group who talked to her privately. Ma'am told us that she was very scared.

We all decided to meet her father. The same evening we went to her father and told him this, but her father was not ready to listen. The only thought that was going on in his mind was what would happen if people got to know about this. We would be greatly insulted. He was threatening to commit suicide in front of us and was also talking about killing my friend. When her father said all this we realised why my friend was not able to talk to anyone about this.

Then we all thought that now we will talk to her mother. I told my friend that we will go to your house and explain this to your mother. Then we went to her house and talked to her mother. We told her that a boy was harassing her daughter since last six-eight months. Why are you not listening to your daughter?

Her mother got upset with her own daughter asking why you have told this to your friends? This would be a great insult to us. Her mother started scolding her. When her mother started shouting loudly at her, we left from there.

Then the next day when I went to her house again, her parents were staring at me. Her father started scolding me very harshly. I listened to his scolding. He almost started shouting at me saying why you come to my house everyday with this thing. Whenever I went to my friend's house to discuss her issue, I was scolded and had to return, but I still did not give up. Once his eyes were red and he got very angry and said to me with a frown on his brow that don't you understand being told once? I was scared after hearing his scolding, but still I did not agree. I kept going to his house. I had decided that no matter how much he scolds me, how much he shouts at me, I will keep telling him about my friend's problem and fear, I will keep talking to him.

I kept going to his house for many days. After a few days he understood some of what I said. One evening I went to his house and said, why am I coming to your house again and again; because she is

not just your daughter, she is also my friend; it is a matter of violence she is facing every day. It's about removing her fear. Then somewhere something came to his mind. He understood what I meant.

I shared this matter in the meeting of our Child Protection Committee. I said that all of you have agreed to get her parents to write an application. They told me to write an application about this matter. Her parents together got me to write the application which I showed to the people of our Child Protection Committee. The members said we will also accompany you to the Child Welfare Committee to give this application. I myself went to the CWC office with the girl. I told this to those people. They listened to me very attentively and immediately started the proceedings. They were very happy with me. All those people together honoured me. That boy left that locality. Now the boy does not bother that girl anymore. Her family too honoured me. Now my friend is happy and so are her parents.

A change of heart is not easy but not impossible either.





## From Knowing To Convincing

It all happened the other day. It was summer season. I was playing 'langdi' (to catch the other participants, running only with one leg keeping other leg folded) with some girls who were my friends in the front yard of my home. I noticed that one 'Didi' (a lady) reached my home and started knocking our door. I stopped playing and went to her. I asked her, " who are you? " I had never seen her earlier visiting my home. She told me to call my Mummy. I asked her, "Is there any work?" Then she said that I should call my Mummy or Daddy. So I thought that she must be having some important work. I told her to wait outside till I call my Mummy. I ran inside my home and told my Mummy that some lady was waiting for her outside. Mummy asked me, " who is she "?

I said that I don't know her. I have seen her for the first time.

Mummy came out to see her and asked, "Who are you? I don't know you."

When my Mummy said this, I was surprised. I thought that Mummy must be knowing her. Then that 'Didi' greeted Mummy. In response, Mummy also greeted her and asked her to take a seat. Didi sat on the cot and my Mummy sat on the ground. Mummy asked me to get a glass of water. I did so and handed the glass of water to Didi. Then I stood there in one corner. Didi drank the water. She told Mummy that she had come from the Children's Centre and wishes to get all the children together. She requested my Mummy to send me to the Centre. Mummy asked her, " Why should I send my daughter there? "

To this she answered that other children will also be there.

Mummy straightaway refused to send me. However, I did not understand her purpose to call me to the Centre. Earlier neither anybody visited us for such work nor children were not asked to come



together. In fact when we all played, many elders used to shout at us. They didn't allow us to play. Sometimes they visited our homes to complain about us saying that these children make a lot of noise. This had stopped our playing together. As a result, now I play with only a few of my friends. I had such thoughts in my mind and I noticed that my Mummy and that Didi were having an argument. Didi was insisting that my Mummy should allow me to go to the Centre and this is not going to harm anyone. Further Didi also said that she will teach us some good things. Mummy and Didi talked on this issue for at least half an hour. Finally Mummy agreed and said that we will send her to the centre.

Mummy asked Didi as to what time should we send her? Didi said 'at 2 in the afternoon' and she left. Then Mummy told me to visit the Centre at two. I said I am not going. My Mummy was very angry and shouted at me. Finally, I agreed to go.

However, I was in two minds about visiting the Centre. I spent a lot of time in thinking. Finally I decided that I should go, otherwise Mummy will get very angry with me. I got ready to go out at 2 in the noon. I told Mummy that I am going to the Centre.

Mummy said, "Okay."

As I walked, my mind was engrossed in thoughts and I wondered what will happen at the Centre and why I was asked to go there? I was also a bit frightened and hoped that they won't ask me any questions. When I reached the place I saw that there were many children, boys and girls. I had not seen them earlier. With fear in my mind, I joined them and sat there. I observed that seating arrangement was totally different which I had not seen earlier. We all children were asked to sit forming a U shape. In my school, this was never done. Instead, two students shared one bench.

In school we were asked to sit away from each other. Many a times I have to take a seat away from my friends. However, here we were seated near each other. We could very well see each other. I talked to the girl who was sitting next to me very hesitantly. I asked her name

and she asked mine. We shared our names and also the location of our homes. Thus we communicated with each other a little bit. We became friends. There were other children to whom I spoke. I felt hesitant and a bit scared as I had not talked to anybody in this way. After a while, Didi who had visited my home instructed everybody for self introduction by announcing name etc. Hearing this I was totally frightened. So far, such occasion had never occurred in my life. If I was asked to get up first and speak, I was not sure whether I will have the courage to speak. I was looking at Didi who was observing all of us. Then I also looked at everybody. All of them sat there without a word. They all were scared just like me.

Didi asked me to get up and announce my name. I was shaking with fear when I got up. I was shivering. I did not know how and what to speak. Then in a very reassuring manner she told me not to get frightened and I should just tell my name. I was a bit assured and told my name and sat down. My face had become red because of fear. Within few minutes, Didi started explaining about 'children's rights.' This was the first time I heard the words 'child rights'. She repeated these words again and again and said a lot of things about 'children's rights'. I fixed my gaze on Didi because I had never heard something like this earlier. She also said that a children's group will be formed in our locality and we all will meet once every month. In such meetings a lot of useful educational information will be given to us. I could not grasp everything she said. There after she taught us a different game which I enjoyed a lot. Didi is such a nice lady, she is a good teacher and also asks us to play as well, I thought. Nobody allowed us to play in our lane. So I decided to come here and learn whole heartedly new things being taught at the Centre every month.

Now I visit the Centre every month and I notice a considerable change in me. I give a helping hand to others. We have a neighbour named Harish. He has three children. Two sons and one daughter. The eldest son is 11, the daughter is 9 and the youngest son is just 4-year-old child. Harish uncle sends his eldest son to school but he doesn't allow his daughter to go to school. Kamala, the girl is always at home and is engaged in bangle making work.

Once I asked Kamala why she is not attending school. She answered me that her father doesn't have enough money for her school education. Then I asked, " How come your father spends money for the elder son's education?" She replied that her father says, " It is necessary for the boy to be educated and there is hardly any use of education for the girls. As a girl, you should do all the house chores and help your mother."

Then I asked her why she is busy in bangle making work to which she replied that she gets money and the earnings are handed over to her father.

Further I inquired whether bangle making work harms her eyes to which she agreed that it is troublesome but there is no alternative to this work. She said, "If I refuse, parents will beat me ". As our talk was going on, her Mummy called her to come home so she went away. Then next day I asked Kamala's Mummy why she is making Kamala work. Her Mummy angrily said, "It is none of your business. She is our daughter and we will decide whether to make her work or otherwise. " She even shouted at me. I narrated all this in our group where it was decided to visit Kamala's home and talk to her family members.

Next day we all visited Kamala's home. Kamala and her Mummy were busy in making bangles. Seeing all of us, she said to me, " I have already told you yesterday not to question anything about the girl and mind your own business." Then our Didi explained to her the details of ' children's rights ' and there should not be any discrimination between boys and girls. She also made it clear that children under 14 years of age cannot be engaged in any hard work. It was also discussed that how labour work is harmful to children. With a lengthy talk on this matter, finally Kamala's mother agreed to send Kamala to school and not extract work from her.

Now Kamala attends school. She has stopped her bangle making work. I felt nice and happy as I could help her. I regularly attend school. Everybody agrees with me on important matters. Whenever I offer my opinion, it is valued by the listener. I actively participate in many school programmes. Now I am at the top in all school activities.





## Joys Of Learning

My name is Sumit. I am interested in photography and traveling to new places. The place where I live is called a plateau. In the local language it is also called Path. This is an area which is neither very mountainous nor plain. This is a rocky terrain, there is very limited amount of cultivable land. The agriculture here is completely dependent on rain. It is very hot here in summer and very cold in winter. The livelihood of the people here mostly depends on labour, agriculture and trade. A lot of dry wood trade is another livelihood option. Migration is the main problem here because of which education, health and life style is affected.

My village is in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh which is a rural area adjacent to Madhya Pradesh. Our village has river, forest and fields. The river is a source of water supply for the local population. River water is also used for agriculture. This river is completely dependent on seasonal rain. Apart from the river there are some small patches of forest with natural beauty near our village. Small wild animals are found in this forest, like: fox, jackal, rabbit, nilgai, hyena etc. Thorny plants like bushes, acacia, palash shisham, sangwan, bamboo, eucalyptus, mahua, neem, banyan etc. are found in this forest. There is also a very old huge banyan tree in this forest.

The main crops of this region are wheat, jowar, millet, paddy, oilseeds. There are also guava gardens here and vegetables like tomato, bottle gourd, brinjal, potato, bitter gourd, pumpkin are also grown. However, from time to time we face a serious problem of water shortage. Along with changing weather the water level of the river goes down causing serious inconvenience to people. For some time, we have also been facing natural disasters such as: storm, lightning and hail...

There is an ancient Hanuman temple here where all the people of the village worship. There is also a big banyan tree near the temple. Many branches of the tree keep touching the ground. There is a primary school where small children of the village go to study. I also studied in the same school. There is a ground near the school for children to play. The name of that ground is 'Manarega Park' where children exercise and play. Elders also come here to exercise. There are also three-four small shops in the village, where people buy goods as per their needs. There are RCC roads in the small streets of the village. There is also a pond on the outskirts of the village where fish farming is done.

In our village we formed a youth club. Initially only five boys joined. One is very good in running, one is good in teaching children and in playing with them, one is an electrician and one is fond of wearing branded clothes, I i.e. Sumit, I have already told you about myself in the very beginning. The dream of us youth members is to improve the life of the village. We teach the people of our village and also learn from them. We have learned from our elders not to take any decision hastily. I have learned from the people of my village that on occasions such as marriage, we should help each other.

The name of my group is 'Gangotri Yuva Group'. A month after the formation of the group, five of us held a meeting with the children in the village, including some youth. First of all, we told all of them what we wanted to do. We want to improve inequality, environment, civic amenities in our village. We appealed to all of them to join the group. Two children joined after this first meeting. Rahul was the main leader of the group. He created a WhatsApp group.

Our group met every month. Initially no one was paying much attention to it. Some people from the village used to say that you people cannot do much with this. Initially more children were not joining. There were only seven of us in the group. But we kept taking the group forward and kept holding meetings from time to time. After four months, when our group planted trees in 'Manarega Park', we were noticed by some people and some more children joined



the group. Now the group had 12 members. Everyone had different responsibility. Two people were the leaders of the group. The job of three was to gather the children and hold a rally. The job of two people was to write applications.

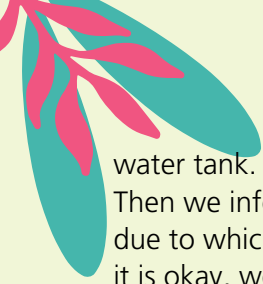
Thus, the group organized awareness rallies for forest conservation involving and connected the village people. The group worked to stop illegal forest erosion. We organised protests by updating the village head, forest department officer, and media about the issue.

The above-mentioned people listened to us. They understand the problems put forth by our group. We were also appreciated. Pradhanji said that whenever you see someone cutting trees in the forest; make a video of them and also take photos of the area, so that we can take legal action. The forest officer not only informed the forest clerk but also reprimanded him and said that forest erosion has to be stopped soon. After a few days the cutting of trees stopped.

Once there was a discussion in our group to make a list of the village children not enrolled in school and who did not have Aadhar card. If their Aadhar cards are made then they too can go to school and study. Our group identified some children and the first thing we did was we get their birth certificates. Then made Aadhar cards of twenty children, five widow pension, six old age pension, online application for toilet and PAN cards of some people. All this work were done through the youth group.

The specialty of our group is that whatever issue any member raises, there is an in-depth discussion on it. All members give their suggestions, we all listen with full seriousness and try to find a solution. Even during Panchayat level meetings, whenever any member of our group brings up any problem of the village, he is heard with full respect and equality.

Once the water pipeline had some fault and the villagers were facing a lot of problems. Our group members lodged an online complaint on the Jan-Sunwai portal of Uttar Pradesh. We also called the clerk of the



water tank. Munshi said, what can I do, if the water is not flowing. Then we informed the chief that the pipe was either jammed or burst due to which there was no water supply to the village. Pradhan said, it is okay, we will get it repaired. Twenty days passed but the water pipeline was not repaired. Then our group complained again. A few days later, when the mechanics came and checked, the pipeline was opened at many places illegally and someone had blocked it preventing the water flow to our village. Now water has started coming.

Our group keeps organizing awareness campaign, rallies in the village from time to time. Recently, on Youth Day, we held a meeting with all the young friends and said that we all need unity, only then we can carry forward any work. We should avoid in-fighting. Special days are also celebrated by the group, such as: Gandhi Jayanti (Birthday), Youth Day, Ambedkar Jayanti, Environment Day etc. I take active part in all these programs.

Most of the villagers are uneducated. They are very conservative, believe in superstitions etc. as tradition. Because of this it is a bit difficult to convince the villagers. We have to face many problems whenever we plan to conduct rallies or awareness campaigns. The villagers do not consider it mandatory to educate village girls. They say that she is a girl, how can she go out and study and also do household work? Girls are not allowed to study. The people of the village say that what will they do after studying, they have only to cook and cook. Through our friends, we promoted education by organizing Beti Padhao (educate your daughter) Rally. Explained to many people how girls are progressing in every field. We tried to explain in every way. We motivated people a lot, only then people started sending their girls to school. Now they have also started sending them outside the village for further studies. In this way we have experienced the joy of learning and have started making everyone understand its need. Believe me, the results are good.



## Toilet - A Dream

This story is from our small village. There are 400 houses in this village. Most of the people here do farming. Everyone's houses are made of mud. Only a few houses have toilets. One has to get up early in the morning to defecate. If we get up late, we have to go a long distance to defecate.

Along with defecation, there is also the problem of water. There is a pond on the way in which everyone washes their hands after defecation. After coming home, they do not wash their hands again. This increases the risk of disease. Village people often become victims of diarrhea, itching and skin diseases.

When one has to go far to defecate, it is difficult to reach school on time. When people are in a hurry to defecate, they run towards the bushes. Once a little girl went to the bushes to defecate and was bitten by a scorpion. During summer one has to go far away carrying water in buckets. Even going to the fields in the afternoon is very painful. Most of the problems have to be faced during rainy days. There is fear of snakes and scorpions especially at night. The roads are muddy. Defecating in fields and bushes is very risky.

Jagruti Yuva Club is the name of our club. It was formed on 10 July 2022. A total of 24 young men and women are members of Jagruti Youth Club. During every monthly meeting, we discuss the problems of our village and their solutions, such as: child marriage, child labour, migration, cleanliness, water problem, employment etc. From time to time, rallies are also organized to make the villagers aware about these issues. Last year, on 18 November 2022, a rally was organized regarding child labour and illegal trafficking of children in which all the children and youth of the village participated.

We chose the first Sunday of the month for the meetings. We inform our young friends prior to the meetings. Our meetings are held in the village Anganwadi center or on the school ground.

The meeting time of the youth club is 3 o'clock. Here apart from the problems of the village, we also discuss poojas, ceremonies, marriages etc. happening in the village. Apart from talks, we also organize sports. Our club has equipment to play football, cricket-set, badminton etc. These games give a lot of happiness. Everyone is in a mood for fun. Our youth club members have different types of skills. Some are good at singing, some at dancing, some at painting, some at making people laugh by telling jokes, some at reading. All the friends also take care of their studies.

When we had a youth club meeting last month, all of us friends were talking about the festival. Sashtina Pooja takes place in August. Vegetables and fruits of the new season are worshipped. During the conversation, one of our friends said that it is not possible to perform pooja this year. When we asked the reason for this, he said that my grandfather had gone to defecate and his foot slipped there. He is seriously injured. There is difficulty even in walking. His grandfather recites mantras during the village festivals. Now he is not even able to walk. It does not seem possible for him to worship this year. The accident that happened to his grandfather often happens to elders in the village. Youth group members held meetings in this regard. After a long discussion, we decided that construction of a toilet is a must.

After this decision, we all wrote a letter to our Mukhiya (village-head). The letter was signed by all the children. Taking the letter, we all met Mukhiya, the head of the Panchayat and told him about this problem. He asked us to fill an application form. We had already filled the application form and kept it ready for the Chief. Mukhiya assured us that soon toilet facilities will be available in our village.

Now problems like child marriage, child labour and migration are less in our village. People have become very conscious about their future. Under the leadership of Jagriti Yuva Club, we have also done tree

plantation. Health related conversations also take place among all our colleagues.

There has been a problem of drinking water in our village for the last many years. The villagers have to face problems in getting drinking water as well as water for bathing. There is only one pond in the village in which the villagers bathe their animals, due to which the water does not remain clean. There is also a river, but it is far away from the village. For this reason most people go to the pond. But now with the help of youth and villagers the water started becoming clean. There is a tap in every house. Now everyone is drinking clean water and taking bath with clean water.





## Listen Attentively & Participate Silently

Talking about my childhood days, I loved the courtyard in front of my house and loved playing there. There are countless memories of my childhood associated with this courtyard. There was a big banyan tree in the left corner of the courtyard and some of its branches touched the roof of my house. On the same tree a crow had made a nest who used to become alert when someone passed by. Perhaps he was afraid that we might harm his babies. The elders tried to stop us from playing by spreading rumors that there were ghosts on the tree. The effect was that we stopped playing at night. There was a field at some distance from our house. Initially the entire land was full of greenery but unfortunately people removed everything to meet their own needs. Many times we thought of going there and playing, but the fear that our elder brothers might be playing there and would stop us from going there. We might get injured or else they will send us off before we can even start playing. That's why my childhood was confined to the courtyard.


When I grew up, I started loving books. Reading and understanding became my hobby. After a few days, I came to know that there was a library at some distance from the house. I started spending more of my time there and within no time that place became special for me. The bench in the library which was towards the window, one side of which was eaten away by termites, made a creaking sound when one sat on it. Some of my memories are written on that bench because no one else sat on it. After a few days we changed our house. I still go to the library but there is a distance from the courtyard and from then till today, this thought keeps circling in my mind like a heron wondering what that courtyard will be like now?



Once I myself and some of my friends were attending a meeting where we were discussing how to make the polluted environment a non-polluted one. The debate was about how to clean the environment? Everyone presented their opinion according to their own understanding. Someone said that we will go from place to place and clean the garbage spread in the society. Someone said that we will go from door to door and provide jute and paper bags to the people and tell them that they should stop using plastic as it is like inviting one's own death. One said that we should plant a new tree every day and stop people from cutting trees. Someone also said that people will be stopped from using all the technology that pollutes the air. The one who was right next to the river said that cleaning has to be done near the river, people make that area very filthy. One said that we will spray medicine at various places to prevent diseases like dengue and malaria. At last one giving importance to everyone's views one of us said that we will organise a rally and perform a street play.

When everyone expressed their opinion, I was silent. Then their eyes turned towards me. They started asking me my opinion. They were looking at me with the hope that maybe I would come up with some good idea. But alas! What would I say? This thing was troubling my mind whether all these steps that they are planning to take will really clean the environment? Will we be able to breathe open and fresh air? If we go from place to place and get the garbage cleaned, then after a few days the same conditions will be found again in those places which have been cleaned. Now everyone wants to do everything sitting at home. Even if we go door-to-door and provide jute and paper bags, people will still use plastic bags. They find plastic bags look fancy. As far as planting trees is concerned, if we plant a tree every day then it takes so many years to grow big. And here millions of trees are cut down every day. Whom will we stop?

We talk about stopping new technology. People are embracing it in spite of knowing that it can cause our death. What to explain? The condition of the river is such as if our food will not get digested if we do not spread dirt there. Mosquitoes breed on dirt and when we are



not ready to clean it then what is the use of spraying medicine? People like to just watch and listen to rallies and dramas, but when time comes for implementation, they all step back.

Everyone was looking at me with expectations and I was silently wondering whether we would be able to clean this polluted environment or the situation would remain the same, when there is a loud cry saying that even breathing is difficult. What can I do? Can there be a better option as answer than remaining silent in these moments?





## Our Home

This is about those days when I had got some maturity. Our village does not mean a village which has its own houses and its own land. Not one that is self-reliant. Our village means a whole family which is its own, even though it does not have its own house or its own land.

Once a sports teacher came to our village to teach us handball. He asked who wants to play handball? I found this game new so I said I would like play. Then our practice started. My friends also joined. Our practice took place every day from 4 to 6 p.m. Before starting the game, we had to complete five rounds of the ground as warm up exercise. Then we also had to run. This is how our practice ended every day. Then one day our teacher told us that today I will tell you about your respective places from where you will play. I was very nervous whether I would be selected today or not. Suddenly the coach took my name and said that I will play in the place of PP. I was very happy. I started feeling like I had accomplished something. My friends also got their places. Thus, the time started passing smoothly. We were part of something that made us happy. we had found something that we enjoyed.

Then one day our coach told us that we were going to Saran to participate in the state level competition. Everyone was very happy. The coach said that we have to work hard day and night. Then our practice started. We worked very hard. One day a tailor came with the coach. He started taking our measurements. We couldn't understand what was happening!

The coach said he is taking measurements for our uniforms. Then the day came when we had to go to Saran to play. But it is said that too much happiness is not good. It rained that day. All happiness got

washed away with water. The coach said that we will go tomorrow. We got new hope with. We packed our bags. My mother also gave me laddus, chocolates and some snack and told me to play with full concentration and not to bother about what anyone has to say.

The next day we had to leave at six in the morning. We were very excited and scared at the same time. I was at the station for the first time. Everyone was in a hurry. We took a lot of pictures. Just then our train arrived. We quickly boarded the train and said goodbye to Begusarai and said we would meet again.

...The place we stayed here was not our house yet while leaving it, there was uneasiness in my mind. The land here was not ours, yet while leaving it, I felt some kind of pain.





## **We Children Built The Road**

It was a year ago. It all started from that day which I am narrating as it is. The story is of a village where the morning starts with a long queue at the hand pump and the day ends with darkness all around because the electricity goes off from time to time. I myself and all the other members of Child Panchayat are residents of this colony.

Those days were the winter season. We had got a wedding invitation. All of us brothers and sisters were very excited to go for the wedding. Why not? From wearing new clothes to the opportunity to eat different types of dishes. The new clothes decided three days ago were taken out and worn with great enthusiasm. There was so much noise inside the house that no one heard the heavy rain that had started almost an hour ago.

Then father said in a loud voice that the rain has stopped a bit, so we should leave quickly. Wearing colorful clothes, new sandals and new shoes, we brothers' sister's mom and dad came out of the house. While walking on the way, we were deciding - who would fill his stomach with kulfi and who would fill his stomach with halwa. Mom was fed up after hearing these things for three days.

Mom scolded and said, everyone walk quietly otherwise you will never know when you will slip and fall into the mud. Mom's words were about to end when a thumping sound came from behind. Mummy's leg got stuck in the saree and she slipped and fell down. We all ran towards her. There was laughter but there was also fear. How will mom go to the wedding with clothes covered with mud?

I don't know what Papa's anger was about - on the rain, on the mud on the road due to the unpaved road or on Mummy. In a loud rebuke

he said, you all are not fit to go anywhere. Go home quietly! With tears in our eyes and a sad heart, we started moving towards home.

The next day was Wednesday. We had to wear white dress for school. Manoj was one of the most hyper children living in our colony. The whole school was aware of his mischiefs.

He had reached school having fun but today he was different. Manoj was standing outside his class, crying. His white clothes had become dirty, soaked in mud.

While talking over lunch, we came to know that Manoj was coming to school when a biker drove his vehicle in such a way that mud got splattered all over his uniform. Ma'am scolded him and said that it must be your fault and made him stand outside with wet clothes.

Then suddenly I heard Mona calling out. She said, "You were not seen during the entire wedding! Were you so busy eating?" With a sad face hanging down I told the whole story. Then we came to know that the unpaved road was always causing a lot of problem not only to us but to others as well. While we were talking, we didn't realize when the bell rang.

After school everyone was in a hurry to go home. Just then Manoj's voice came from behind, 'walk carefully otherwise what happened to me in the morning may happen to all of you.'

Like every month, a Bal Panchayat meeting was held on Saturday. Didi went around to call the children. All the children assembled under the peepal tree and the meeting started. A neighbor who was very ill was walking with great difficulty towards the ambulance. Didi said that due to the unpaved road, the ambulance could not reach his house. Watching this we all became sad. Mona said, this road has troubled everyone, let's talk about it now. After a little discussion on things of the month, Didi asked, is there some problem which could be solved by talking? Many mentioned about their problems due to unpaved road.

One of us said, didn't you see how much trouble the sick uncle had to face? Mona said that now this problem has become too much. Can't we do something? Some of our friends said that we are also the Panchayat of this village. Maybe we are small, so what. We can still try.

Often we talk about four issues in the Bal Panchayat meetings; Education, Local Issues, Health and Child Protection. As unpaved road was a local issue it could be discussed. Didi also said, the question is not about whether the issue is big or small but about trying out. If we have courage, we can definitely achieve something.

Divya asked, what can we do? Naman said; let's meet the big panchayat of the village. Divya asked, who is this biggest person in panchayat and where will we find him? Kishan told that big panchayat has Sarpanch. Do you Remember, when last time exercise books were being distributed in the village, he had come to distribute copies to us.

Gudiya said that the Deputy Sarpanch lives near her house. She also said that if anything goes wrong in the village, everyone comes to him for advice. There is no problem, we will all go together to talk to the Deputy Sarpanch this Sunday. On Sunday, at around 11 o'clock, all the children gathered and went to meet the Deputy Sarpanch. On the way, when we got to know the name of Deputy Sarpanch, Kavita said, this is the same person who taught us to play Kabaddi, Listening to this the fear in my mind reduced. After reaching his house the children explained the entire problem in detail. He also felt that the children had a point to make. He said - Children, I completely agree with what you say but I will need a letter in writing.

A letter was written in the next Bal Panchayat and with great hope and enthusiasm we handed over this letter to the Sarpanch and Deputy Sarpanch. Two months passed. The road was the same as before. Our hopes had gone down a bit but there was faith in the Deputy Sarpanch as well.

In March 2023, road construction material, sand, soil etc. started being dropped outside the houses. There was an atmosphere of happiness in

the locality. Road construction had started but like every government work, the work was progressing very slowly. Some parts of the road got constructed and then the work came to a halt because of rain. Hopefully the work will start soon and one day the entire road in our colony will be paved.







## Navratri In A New Way

I live in a village. There are six members in my family, my mom, dad, my two sisters, one brother and myself. I am the eldest. All the other siblings are younger than me. I am studying in tenth class. I love studying and making mehendi. I have a close friend whose name is Malti. She studies in class eleventh. She is one class ahead of me. Malti and I love pomegranate. There is a pomegranate tree behind my house. I like my village. There is greenery and mountains all around our village.

Last year, the festival of Navratri was celebrated with great pomp and show in our place. We all played important roles in that event. Earlier, the festival of Navratri was celebrated in a very simple manner. Everyone used to worship Mataji in their own homes and observe fast. No one played Garba. Everyone was just busy with their daily routine.

One day while we all friends were playing and the festival of Navratri was about to come a thought came to my mind that why not celebrate the festival of Navratri in a different way this time. I talked to my friends and started planning Navratri celebration. However, we had no money to celebrate.

The next day after school was over; I talked to all the boys and girls of the class and told them about the Navratri plans. Everyone agreed to cooperate. We thought of getting donations for the celebration. Then my friends and I together collected donations from the people of the village.

Just before the festival, some of us children went to the market. The market was very well decorated. Decorated with colorful lights the market was looking very nice. There were big statues of Mataji everywhere which looked very beautiful. We bought a very beautiful big idol of Mataji from a shop and came to the village singing and

dancing with Mataji with great fanfare. After roaming around the entire village, we installed the idol of Mataji in the temple.

With the help of some people of the village, we cleaned the temple courtyard. Grass had grown there; we cleared it and leveled the courtyard by adding dry soil. Then we collected decoration items from the village. Some brought bamboo and some brought saree and chunni. Some brought flowers and leaves and some brought colorful papers. Then together we decorated Mataji's pandal. We beautified the pandal with colorful chunnis and sarees. We also installed colorful lights in it. All the preparations were done well but we had nothing to play music. Then we went to the house of a person in the village who used to play DJ. When we asked him for help, he agreed to play DJ for nine days. Everything was done very well and we all were very happy.

Then we practiced playing Garba and from the day Navratri started, we had a fast for nine days. We played Garba with great enthusiasm for nine days. We wore different colored sarees and danced a lot for nine days. Mataji was immersed on the tenth day. We liked this festival very much and decided to organize Navratri the same way every year. Since then, we celebrate Navratri festival with great pomp every year in our village. We bring and establish Mataji's idol. We sing and dance and play Garba for nine days. All the people of the village participate in this.





## Cooperation From All

It has only been thirteen months since I joined the lab. Earlier I liked to listen and even today I like to listen to music. Here my job was to listen to the recorded stories of my colleagues.

Every partner in our lab has some specialty. Sonali writes stories in a different style. Naveen has a habit of playing with computer and its parts. Rakesh comes to the lab and sits in a corner. He closes his eyes and starts thinking about something. If someone asked him if he had slept, he would say no! I am thinking. And, more than listening to the story, Vishal likes to comment on it.

One day we all were discussing among ourselves in the lab that in two-three days the videos we are going to upload on YouTube have to be shown to the people of the locality as well. But, before that the lab should be given a new look. We started thinking. We were also wondering as to who can do what. Like someone likes to do screening so he will figure out where the movie will play and where the computer can be installed. If someone does the room setting well then, he can be given this work. Some people are fond of lighting, so they said that we will do the lighting of the room nicely.

I started thinking why not give a makeover to the walls of the room as well. I said to my friends; why not arrange the photos on the walls in a different way? If the location of the board is changed, the settings of the lab will change. This will give a new look to the lab. One wall will remain empty which will be for the projector. Then Naveen said, whatever you do, we will definitely have to put a long string of lights around the table, that too in blue colour. After that everyone started giving their suggestions. This will be installed on this wall that will be installed on that wall. I am very fond of painting and designing. Since

long I was thinking of doing something new here at the lab. Everyone liked each other's suggestions and started clapping for each other. I was very happy. We all started talking among ourselves about when to do the makeover. Everyone decided and said - tomorrow will be a good day. Naveen jokingly said, 'Why tomorrow?' Is it an auspicious day or so that you want to do the work tomorrow?

I said, oh no, whatever work can be done right away should be finished quickly. Everyone said in one voice - Tomorrow is holiday for everyone, so tomorrow everyone will come to the lab early and quickly finish whatever work needs to be done in the lab.

We have gone around various places in the locality to narrate and show our work like videos, photos and articles many times, but we were inviting people to the Centre for the first time. About a hundred people were to come. Fifty of them were already ones on whom we had made the video. We discussed and decided that this program would run for three days. Therefore, before these days, the center had to be given a new look, and all the other colleagues have to check the room every day after the program to see that nothing is missing. I had taken on this responsibility on me. The job of some was to get the people coming to sign and also explain the programme.

Just the next day we all reached the lab early and started doing our work. Someone was editing on the computer and someone had gone for anchoring with two-three colleagues. Someone was busy completing his story. Everyone was trying to get their share of work done quickly. Whoever among them got his work done first would start helping the other. That day apart from work no one had time to even chat a little bit. Everyone's work was almost done. One by one they were busy completing the remaining work. Actually, the lab setting that we were planning to change had one room and another small space in which we keep our files, copies, and books. There were three tables in that room and a computer on one of them. There were four chairs and four small stools and a place to sit on the ground. A white sheet was spread on that place.

To change the settings, the photos hanging on the walls were taken down and the board was taken down for cleaning. Everyone was working with full dedication. There was a lot of work. After cleaning the walls, photos were pasted one by one in different ways. Everyone was talking about what would go on this wall and what on the other. I told all of them that this particular wall will have to be left for the projector so that we can show people the YouTube videos made by us. After placing the photos, we cleaned the board thoroughly and put it back on the wall.

All of our work was thus completed.





## The Matter Will Speak

It was summer time. Everyone was relaxing in their respective homes under the fan. Just then I returned from school with my friend Ragini. We had food and rested at home for a while. There is a very old community hall in our village. It has doors and windows on both the sides and there is a verandah as well. There is a slogan written on one of the walls of the hall. 'The one who gets married in childhood has hit an axe on one's own feet.'

There is a hand pump and a neem tree near this building. My friends Meenu and Geeta stay near that community hall. We both sit on the nearby platform and chat. There is a grocery store a short distance away. Kishori Club was having a meeting in the community hall, where all my friends were participating. They were discussing about health. Due to the Corona period, everyone had masks on their faces. My close friend Monica explained the reasons for malaria in that meeting.

I was also given an opportunity to speak in that meeting. Earlier some cultural program was taking place in my school where I sang a song. I was very scared that day because it was the first time I had gone on stage. Despite this, I sang the song and also got the trophy. From that day my fear was gone. Everyone told me that you sang very well. I felt that I can also speak well. From that day onwards I participate in all the cultural programs of the school.

In one of the meetings, my friends told me to talk about menstruation because they all feel ashamed. "You can say all this without hesitation." Then I introduced myself and told them about the problems that occur during menstruation. When I presented my views, everyone listened attentively. Then together my friends and I made a list in which we wrote the names of girls above 14 years of age.

After a month, we again had a meeting of Kishori Club but this time in the Gram Panchayat Bhawan. We have started having our monthly meetings there. There is a big hall there. There are paintings on the walls and there are also two tamarind trees outside. There is a temple nearby with a compound around it. The building has two doors and three large windows with curtains. There are two-three chairs and a table inside that hall. There is a big mat. We all sit on the mat and hold Kishori Club meetings.

We gave Ritu Cup and sanitary napkins to the girls from the list we had made during our first meeting and told them how to use it. With this I thanked the girls of Kishori Club for having understood the matter properly. If the matter is not understood properly, then there is no point in speaking. The matter will speak only when the matter is understood.





## Way To School

It was time to go to school at 7:30 in the morning. We all used to leave at 6:30. The school was about 5 kilometers away from our village. We had to go walking. Our school is surrounded by greenery ; it has 15 rooms and a library.

When all of us friends came out of our homes, it was all muddy outside. It was raining the whole night. It was so muddy all around that there was no room to even put a foot on ground. Grandfather suggested to make place for feet by placing stones or bricks. When we moved ahead facing this problem, Anuj said that the drain ahead must be filled with water. We will have to call the villagers, only then we will be able to cross the drain. Going ahead, I saw that the flow of the drain was very fast. It seemed as if a river was flowing. At the same time, some people who till yesterday were not even ready to send their children to school came to help their children to across the drain. Then a voice came from behind saying, move quickly, children, you will be late for school. That voice was of Bholu Kaka. Our village is on the left side of the drain and the school is on the right side of the main road.

Some people of the village had come carrying a long rope. They tied the rope to a big tree on both sides of the drain. First of all, forty-year-old Bholu Kaka moved forward with the help of the rope, carrying his daughter Sakshi on his back. Sakshi studied in eighth class.

I still remember that earlier Bholu's uncle did not want to send Sakshi to school. She used to help in household and farming work. Kaka thought that if Sakshi went to school, there would be problems in farming work. Though Sakshi wished to go to school she was not allowed to go to school for several days. We all thought of talking to uncle and went to his house. We told him that Sakshi studies in eighth



class, she will soon have board exams, if you keep her at home like this, her results will be affected badly. She is very good in her studies. On this Kaka said, farming is also important, this is how we feed ourselves. Unanimously, we told him that the farming work should be done by him and as children our work was to study and play. Only then did he agree to send Sakshi to school.

When Bholu Kaka was crossing the drain with the help of the rope, there was only fear on his face. Sakshi also had her eyes closed. It was only after crossing the drain that a smile returned to Sakshi's face. After Bholu Kaka, thirty-five-year-old Jagat Kaka moved ahead with his daughter Sunita. Sunita studies in sixth class. Sunita was also not going to school for more than ten-fifteen days. When all of us friends went to her house, we saw that Sunita's mother was lying on the bed. Sunita told that her mother was not well since a few days. Ram asked if she had gone to the hospital. Sunita said, 'No! The drain is full of water for a long time. Mother's health would have worsened if we had taken her through the drain. If there had been a bridge, we would have taken her to the hospital on time. Aunty's health is better since a few days now and Sunita is able to attend school.

Similarly, all the children crossed the drain one by one. Saying bye to their parents all the children went to school happily. But the villagers were worried that the children would have to cross the drain again on their way back.



## Time For Adventure



That time it was very hot in our village. Some people were cleaning their coolers while some others went to the ponds to take bath. It being hot inside the house, people came out and sat in the courtyard. It was Monday. My friends were going to school. They were wearing washed clothes and had combed their hair properly. Our school has nine rooms, a roof and a blackboard in every room. There is a table and chair for our madam to sit. There were tables and chairs for us too.

Outside the verandah of the school there was a neem tree. Then there was a water tank. Along with four of my friends, I had planted different types of plants in pots. We used to water those plants daily. Gradually, flowers started blooming on those plants. But our school had fewer rooms and more students. Friends from each class could not get a separate room. Students of two-three classes used to sit in one room. We girls used to sit together. It was great fun. We all used to chat. This caused noise as well as loss of studies. The rooms we got had water dripping from their roofs during the rainy season. Then it used to be difficult for us to sit.

Before the rain, dark clouds appeared and there was lightning. Many times, it would happen that there would be sunlight in one part and shade in the other. The biggest thing was that there was no toilet facility in our school. There was one, but it was quite old. There was not even a tap inside it. It was a little broken. The doors were rotten. A group of children was formed in our village that used to meet every month. Ganesh Sir used to attend our monthly meetings. The meetings were held in the village community hall. The atmosphere there was very good.

Little children were playing on the open space. There was a neem tree outside. Friends also used to swing by tying a swing to one of the Neem branch. Women would be filling water at the hand pump outside while we were discussing how to solve the problems of our school in the monthly meeting. Sir told us that all of you together write a letter to the village Sarpanch. He will help you all. Then all of us friends together wrote a letter to Sarpanch Saheb. When we reached the Panchayat with the letter their meeting was already going on. We liked the atmosphere over there. There were many types of pictures drawn on one of the walls - pictures of toilet, pictures of dustbin, pictures of trees and plants. There were other similar types of paintings as well. There was also a tamarind tree which was quite big.

There was also a temple of Mata ji under the same tamarind tree. Bells used to ring in the temple. Pandit ji used to worship there and the roof of the temple was slightly open. There was a plant of Tulsi Mata Ji. There was proper arrangement of tap and toilet over there. There were beautiful trees and plants on which colorful flowers were blooming. The Panchayat room was very big. When all my friends entered the room, it seemed quite big. The walls were nicely painted. We very much liked the pictures that were inside the hall. In one of the pictures, a farmer was plowing and someone was driving a bullock cart; A woman had a pot on her head and another woman was breastfeeding her child. The room was decorated with these pictures. All the people in that room were sitting far away from each other.

At that time a very deadly disease was going on namely: Corona virus. That disease had shaken up people; they could not sit near each other. People used masks to protect themselves from this disease. Everyone was wearing a mask. The people were talking about the requirements of the village. E.g. there is no proper water system in the village so what action should be taken. Such discussions were going on.

What we found special about the meeting is that the Sarpanch, ward member and secretary listened to all of us very carefully. After listening to the problems, the members of the Panchayat Samiti were busy in

getting them help so that they could get help from the government soon and their problems could be solved. Having observed this we all friends together gave the letter to the Sarpanch Saheb.

Looking at the faces of the people there, it seemed that the question in everyone's mind was why these children have written a letter to Sarpanch Saheb. One must have been wondering as to how these little children got so much courage while the Sarpanch Saheb promised to give all the help required.

After that, work started in our school. Rooms were built on the roof top. Repairs were done where water was dripping. The toilet was well built with tiled floor and a tap inside.





## **Group Singing And Dancing**

One of the days I was playing hand ball on the ground with my friends. After the match was over, our coach called us and said that this time, all the girls will also have to participate in the organization's program. You all will have to perform aerobics dance which is like some exercise. No one would have seen or heard about such a dance. The dance practice will be held in your building tomorrow from 4 pm. All the girls started talking about the dance, how would this dance be? How will this be done? We were talking about the same thing on our way home.

The very next day we all gathered at four in the evening for the dance practice. Senior member of our team - Didi, was going to teach us the dance steps. Then we all went inside the building and she started practicing dance. In the beginning we had some difficulty in dancing aerobics.

There was severe pain in legs, arms and waist for two-three days. Gradually we started getting enthusiasm for dancing.

In just three-four days we learned well. Three days before the event, our coach and senior people from the office came to watch our dance. Be it music, cultural dance or drama all of us were participating in the program. We were 10 of us in the aerobics dance. There were at least thirty-thirty-five people in the building that day. When our turn for aerobics dance was about to come, we all practiced our dance once again properly.

So when it was our turn to dance, we performed the dance well. People liked our dance. Our coach stood up and said that your dance was good but we will have to do still better so that there won't be any mistake on the day of the program. He said, before the program all of

you should buy clothes for dance like white shirt, black jeans, tie and white shoes. We came home. On the day of the program, we all came early in the morning and started practicing. At the same time Didi also came. She said, oh wow! Today you guys came without being invited. We all laughed and joked for a while and then started practicing. After practice was over, we went home.

Today's program was to start at 4 p.m. We got ready at 3:30 and came to the venue of the program. Other children participating in the program had also reached. Time passed slowly. Many people arrived. It was four o'clock and the chief guest of the program too arrived.

Headmasters of many big schools also came. The program started with a welcome song for the guests and then with dance and drama. The boys and girls who had passed class 10th and 12th examinations were felicitated. After that the program continued. Our dance was at the end. By the time all the items were over it was night. We danced well. Everyone liked it very much. The program ended with our dance. Then after having snacks and sweets we all went to our respective homes.





## School Friends Are Needed

My name is Sukhmani, I like reading and writing, traveling, listening to songs and participating in traditional dance and songs. My village is situated on the banks of NH 343 in Garhwa district of Jharkhand state. Most of the people in my village are tribals and they worship nature. My family comes from the Oraon tribe. We speak 'Kudukh' in our community which is my mother tongue. I always look forward to Sarhul and Karma Pooja festivals, which we celebrate with great enthusiasm. On these occasions, I sing, dance and play jhumar with my friends to the tune of the traditional musical instrument Mandar. I very much like listening and humming Nagpuri songs. All the people of my village do farming and animal husbandry and earn their living by collecting wood from the forest and or working as laborers. Our village being surrounded by forest, sometimes a herd of elephants comes and destroys the crops grown in the fields. Whenever such a herd of elephants comes towards our village, then all the people of the village come together and make noise. Though making noise and making them run away like this is fun but it is also a little scary.

My family consists of my parents, two brothers and five sisters. Elder brothers and sisters started living separately after getting married. At present mother, father and I live together. All of us siblings were born in the village itself and we all received our primary and secondary education from the village school. After marriage, my elder brothers took their share from our father and are now taking care of their family and children on their own. Being the youngest in the family, I always got extra love and guidance from the elders.

I studied till eighth grade in the advanced middle school of my village. I used to go to school with one of my friends but now she is married and lives with her in-laws. A few years ago, because of the Corona

global pandemic, the financial condition of my family deteriorated. As a result, I was deprived of education for two years and I also became distant from my friends.

Whenever at home I talked about my continuing with school, my father would always point out his inability to pay for my further studies. I used to see my old friends going to school and see them moving to a new class according to their age. I sometimes felt very sad and felt as if I would never be able to study again. Soon they may even get me married as it happened with my sisters. They too did not get the opportunity to study much. My two elder brothers had studied till 10th standard, while my two sisters had studied till 8th standard and the other two sisters could not study at all. Sometimes I feel that our parents must have worked really hard to get all of us brothers and sisters educated, they too must have wanted us to complete our education but they too were probably helpless because of the circumstances.

Our village school has the facility of education till class 8th and this was the reason why my two elder sisters were able to study only till 8th class. For further studies, the children of our village had to go about twenty kilometers away and enroll in a Plus 2 school. Often parents do not want to send their girls alone to study so far because of the fear that some untoward accident may happen to their daughters. Not just that but they were also worried about the travel expenses of their children, which they couldn't afford. When I was deprived of education, I started helping in the household chores. Many times, in my free time, I used to remember the time spent in my school and how I wished that I could go to school again like before. After being at home for some time, mom and dad started saying that you should also go out with us and do some daily wage work so that you can save some money which will be useful for your marriage. Understanding the situation and agreeing with them, I started going for labor work with my mother and as a result some extra money started coming home. My parents were happy that I obeyed. Now in their eyes I had become a responsible daughter who was supporting her mother and father financially.



Even while working, I often participated in the programs of the organization. Due to the initiative of the organization, a Birsa Kishori group was formed in my village of which I was also a member. My other friends were also in this group. The group had a total of 23 members. We all used to participate regularly in various meetings and activities where health, nutrition, cleanliness, child safety, life skills, leadership ability, importance of education and financial literacy etc. were discussed by the workers of the organization.

Meanwhile, one day I got a chance to participate in a two-day adolescent peer educator training organized by the agency. This training was organized on 22nd and 23rd October 2022 at the Panchayat Bhavan where girls of my age from different villages had come. In the meeting, when everyone during their introduction talked about their age, class and continuing their education, I was feeling very sad in talking about not being able to continue my education and a question was arising in my mind that why did I leave my studies? Some how, I had to study further and by the end of the training I had decided that I would definitely complete my further studies.

After this training, I get selected as a Peer Educator and I started going to different groups of girls and children from other villages apart from my village and discussing the importance of reproductive and sexual health and education. Whatever I was taught in the training, I started telling the same things to the girls of my age. Through this activity, I got a chance to talk to many girls, make some new friends and also got a new identity in my own and other villages. This helped my self confidence to grow. In this process I had to attend regular monthly and quarterly evaluation and planning meetings where the importance of education and child rights were always discussed by the staff of the organization. This gave strength and encouragement to my decision to study again and I decided to join the school.

One day at home, I collected courage to convince my parents to ask them to enroll me in school again in the ninth class. Realising my interest in studies, my father finally enrolled me in the ninth class.

Today like before, with the same enthusiasm, I go to school regularly with my friends. I talk and play with them, now I have a kind of new energy inside me and I have the courage to continue my studies. I feel that going to school with my friends in a group gives me a kind of enthusiasm and confidence and I am not afraid of anything any more. Now I thoroughly enjoy going to school. I get opportunity to participate in a number of programs such as Teachers' Day, Independence Day, Annual Festival etc. I am also getting opportunities to learn new things.





## Collaboration Leads To New Destinations

When I look back, it seems that I have been quite open-minded since childhood. I am a resident of a village in Balrampur district of Uttar Pradesh. My height and physique are average due to which I have to face scolding at home. There are restrictions on girls. I have a joint family. My father has four brothers. We are 15 brothers and sisters from father's four brothers. Our kitchen is common. Joint family has its own problems but there is also the joy of living and eating together, sharing joys and sorrows with each other. We all siblings go to school together; we have better understanding and good chemistry among ourselves.

On way to school, I used to be afraid to pass through some streets but I never expressed this fear to anyone. In fact, I used to tell my friends to be courageous and adventurous. I wanted to do something new collectively, but there was no system by which I could do it. People often came to my father with various problems, most of which were such that they could not be solved despite my father's best efforts. I thought that was a public problem, and if the whole group raises its voice, it could be solved. But no one was ready to come together for fear of being opposed by someone or the other.

Meanwhile, in the year 2021, two people from the team of our organization came to our village and started talking to the youth. This is where I met them. I was impressed by the way they were talking about working through groups and decided to contribute to the development of my village by joining the group. In the beginning, only three-four people like me got involved regularly, while the rest of the youth remained inactive. To get more youth involved, I went around in the village with the youth volunteers and worked hard to make

the group strong and flourish, by meeting and talking to the village youth. Coming from a joint family and being used to living among 15 siblings, it also made working in a group quite easy me. Initially the first three-four months were very disappointing. After the arrival of the representative of the organization and a lot of morale boost, some youth participated in the group though for some time. It was as if they were doing us a favor. Meanwhile, the representative of the organization said that adolescent girls should take iron tablets so that to avoid becoming anemic. We told them that iron tablets were never brought. Then it was decided that it would be best to ask for iron tablets at the time of vaccination. If it is not given, then we should complain about it and see what happens. The day of vaccination came. We asked the ANM for iron tablets but she said that she couldn't get them. In this regard, a public hearing program was organized by the organization. We reached there and complained about this to the CHC Superintendent. The result was that during the next vaccination, we were called and given iron tablets. Making it a rule to take them every week, some tablets were given to all the girls of the village.

After this success, some young boys of the village got interested in our work. There was a consensus among the people that we can solve the problems of the village ourselves by holding a meeting and discussing the problems every month. Though we started doing this it was not all that easy. Some youth still spoke negatively. Some people in the village also taunted that these people have started considering themselves as leaders. Though we felt bad in the beginning gradually we stopped being bothered by this negativism. I understood that one of the main reasons for the lack of proper development of the village was that people shy away from taking initiative and if someone takes the lead, then they condemn them and do not cooperate.

Still, our morale has increased. Though we continue to fight for Anganwadi building for our village, there is no success as yet. There was not even a health center in the village. We tried for that as well. We made a plan and systematically sent the complaint letter from SDM to District Officer during Sampurn Samadhan Diwas (Complete

Satisfaction Day). Not just this, we also presented our demands to the candidates during the election time, which gave a pleasant result in 2023. Now our primary health center is ready. As of now, doctors have not yet been appointed but it is hoped that soon doctors will be appointed and health facilities will be provided to us.

This is the result of our solidarity that the administration had to pay attention to our demands. We have learned the power of working together and taking initiative, this will lead to new roads.





## Elders Listening To Us

My daily journey was quite short. Coming out of a cage-like house, spending six hours in a prison-like school, and there too we just keep complaining in our mind because we are not allowed to speak. Even if you speak, who is there to listen? And even if you do say something, the teacher will scold you and say – If you feel like talking, I will throw you out of the class. So sit quietly for half the day of the school looking out of the window. There was no peace even after returning home. Mom would start like an alarm. Take bath, eat food, do not shampoo today as it is Thursday; after taking bath, first give some water to the plants outside and then do your work. It was difficult for me to get involved in small and big matters of the house and if I asked about something while mom and dad are talking, they would say, don't interrupt! If we talk to our relatives, they would interrupt in the middle and start telling their own life stories. Who could stop them from playing their tambourine and raga? If you leave abruptly, that would be rude. So you just kept listening. I often used to wonder when this journey of listening will come to an end. When will a season come where only my words will be heard?

Meanwhile, I joined a group. I was a stranger in the beginning but in no time I became part of the group. New place, new faces and cool atmosphere. It did not take me long to fit in. Here, there was no rule of sitting in a queue like in school and tuition class. Here everyone is a hero in his own way. The best thing I liked is that here everyone has the power to speak without any fear and hesitation.

Every now and then there would be a gathering of listening and telling stories. It was named as 'An evening of stories, in the names of friends'. Just before it started, all the noise was allowed. But once someone's turn to read his story came, everyone would listen to him



in complete silence. However, the story was, everyone got applause at the end. Friends would make suggestions and express feelings. There was no question of qualifying the presentation as right or wrong. Everyone here gets equal attention. Even today, many things related to home, school and neighborhood are discussed in the club. Even if I raise a big issue among my friends, it does not seem big.

The club is built around our homes just like our homes but here our growing age is not judged through the prism of the grandmothers of the house. After joining the group, it seems my search for an audience is over. We often keep roaming around the streets of the camp. It is difficult to roam in the streets here but for all of us any difficult task becomes easy. If your feet fall into the drains going through the streets here, then understand that it is bad luck and if you go around the entire camp without this problem, then understand that the day is good for you and you are intelligent. Someone has rightly said that it takes time to build relationships. It took time to connect with the camp and the people there, but a bond emerged that could never be broken. This relationship is not limited only to the camp but there are many such places like Shukrabazaar, roads around shops where we can fall at any time on the way but now, we are quite used to it.

We have largely become famous there, because of our collective name. Many people here do not hesitate to join us for our story telling evening. We call them and they come. We also call them respecting their time.

We did something similar that day. We were just wandering around carrying pages of our stories and trying to narrate them continuously. There were only three people who narrated – me, Mohini and Hemlata. We did not count the listeners, but most of them were women. This fear was enough to tell the best of my story. Everyone started dropping in, in their colorful clothes and started sitting. Within a short time the room was also full. Everyone started talking either about our club or about their children. We wondered if these people older in stature, experience and age would give any importance to

our stories. There was a strange nervousness and uneasiness before I started reading my story. At this time, Sanjay was remembering the initial steps taken in the camp. When we would reach his house to meet people, they would be busy in their work and would just keep saying yes. Even if our question was how are you? The answer while plucking vegetables from a distance was 'yes'. Once it was too much. All three of us went to meet a friend. To write a story about the family. Our friend's father made his daughter sit in front of us. She was just of our age and said, 'I will finish cleaning my utensils, you talk to my daughter, she knows everything about me and the house.'

From then on we thought it right to put ourselves first. The evening of stories started with me. When my name was taken everyone's eyes were fixed on me. I smiled and told the name of my story and started the story. Even though the words were coming out of my mouth and I was trying to calm down the atmosphere, my focus was only on that sudden peace. For a moment I wondered if all the people had left. I looked up. The people were very much there with their ears. For the first time, I could not digest this heavy silence. But they all remained silent to listen attentively. It was a matter of happiness that the women who don't come out of their families or the problems of their mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, were today applauding my story and becoming a part of it.

Our peers always listen to us and we listen to them. This was the day when some elders of the society listened to us. Not only did they listen, but they listened with full attention. It is okay to come and attend the story session, but it is a big thing that they listened to the young artists who want to take a new flight. This experience gave us great happiness and our world started appearing more beautiful to us.






## Power Of Efforts

My name is Roshni. My village is in Kaushambi district in the state of Uttar Pradesh. I have heard that my district is one of the most backward districts of the state but I love my village very much. There is a canal, a school and greenery all around my village. Chili , bananas and paddy are cultivated in my village. All the people mainly do farming. All the children of the village are enrolled in the village primary school. There is a Panchayat building on the outskirts of the village where vaccination takes place on the third Saturday of every month. LCPC meeting is also held on the same day. I am also a member of VLCPC.

Till a few years ago, child labour was a big issue because earlier parents used to take their children to work in brick kilns, but since some time, the efforts, meetings, rallies and decisions of VLCPC have created awareness among the people. Now parents are more aware and send their children to school. I also go to the village primary school and study in class seven. There were 18 children enrolled in my class but only five-six children used to come. It was demoralising to me. There used to be silence in the school during lunch time.

A few days later, after asking the school teachers, I along with my elder sister and friends, made a list of 30 children of classes 6, 7 and 8 who were not attending school. We went to everyone's house. We made 5 lists of 6 children each and met everyone's parents. We asked them to send their children to school. Along with this it was also explained why studying was important. Actually, Pooja's name was not in my list but she lived just next door and did not go to school. Their house consists of three rooms. They cook food in the front room of the house. Two cots are kept there. A quilt and a mattress is kept on the cot. I asked Pooja's parents to send Pooja to school. I tried to convince



them but her mother not only refused but asked me to get lost. I got very angry.

The same day I told this to the VLCPC and the children's club members. At first, we thought of letting it go and not going to their house, but then when we told ma'am, she said that we should go together once again and give it a try. The next day three of us went together. While I explained to her mother for one and half an hour, her father arrived. We explained to him for a long time and insisted. But he said she won't be enrolled in school now. We asked how old was she? He said that her age was 12 years. I thought it was good enough and there was no age limit for studying. We insisted a lot. Finally, her father agreed and she was enrolled in the fifth class.

It was only because of my friends who were in sixth and seventh class that we were able to do this. We had a lot of fun doing this work. Later we kept visiting children's homes for three days. Toured the entire village. While the hard work was successful, we also enjoyed doing this work. My class now has a total number of 18 children. Sometimes it is 17, that is okay. But all the kids go to school now.

I love my School. There are lots of flowers. The school remains clean. I feel very good when all the children come to school in uniform. There are 9 teachers in the school. Classes run till eighth standard. There are two libraries and a lot of sports material. There are two banyan and many kadamb trees planted in the school compound. The school has two gates. Now an Anganwadi has also been started in the school itself. The school has three hand pumps and a toilet.


I am the sanitation manager of the children's club of my village. Whatever I learn there, I try to teach it to others. Efforts make things happen.



## **Between Getting And Not Getting Married**


Corona virus arrived in the month of March 2020 and studies stopped. The work of our parents had also stopped. At that time, we had to go through a lot of troubles. The elders were not going to work, so there was difficulty in cooking food at home. Then a ma'am came to our community. They opened a centre in our club. Mam and Sir together started teaching all the children for free. The enthusiasm for reading awakened among us children again. All of us started studying with the help of Ma'am and Sir. Suddenly we started feeling that our center is the only such place where we could speak and hear whatever was in our mind. If we had any problem, we could go and tell Ma'am. Ma'am and sir not only used to listen to us but also used to help us. There was a suggestion box in our centre. We used to write all the things that we could not say on a paper and put them in that box. Mam used to help us by reading our chits.

One day we sat down to discuss the chits from the box with ma'am and sir. It was decided that the box would be opened on the first Saturday of every month. A group will be responsible for this work. There will be 8 people in that group—two parents, two students, two teachers and seniors from our youth group. Students used to write what they felt and put that in the box and we used to help them. Sometimes we even found some funny things in that box, which made us laugh a lot. Some child had written are you a Santa Claus? Will you give me a gift? I want an airplane. Another child had written that he wanted to meet Shahrukh Khan. Apart from interesting things, some children also wrote about their needs. Like some children wanted books. Someone needed a pen and a copy for writing and someone needed a bag. In this way, everyone used to write what they had on their mind on the chits and put them in that box.



Once in the month of February, when we opened the suggestion box, we received a different kind of letter. It was written that ma'am, I want to study, but my family wants me to get married. You please help me. But the chit had no name on it. We discussed among ourselves and decided that we will find out who was getting married in the community. From our youth group I, my friends, boys and girls, we all started roaming around in the community. We know all the people from the colony so we started trying to trace the girl by conversing with them. Two-three days passed but no one had any clue. There was Saraswati Pooja two days later, so we started preparing for the pooja. The pooja is held in the club of our community. All of us children got busy in preparing for the pooja when suddenly we noticed that Neelam was not with us. I went to Neelam's house with some friends to call her. When Neelam came, we said –you have not come since long. Come join us, there is a lot of work in the club. Neelam said- Okay, okay let us go. We all prepared for the pooja together. After the pooja, we all girls got dressed up and were talking among ourselves that lets visit all the schools in the locality to see the idol of Goddess Saraswati.

Neelam was standing alone. We also asked her to come along. We are all going to hang out, it will be a lot of fun. Neelam said, you guys go, I don't feel like it! When we all forced her, she agreed to come. We all went out for a walk. Except Neelam, all of us were laughing and joking among ourselves, but she was completely silent. It seemed that her attention was somewhere else. She was not there despite being with us. She was looking very upset. It seemed as if she wanted to say something, but was unable to say. We asked her- What happened, you look so worked up. As soon as I said this, she held me and started crying. I pacified her and again asked as to what was wrong, but she did not tell anything. She just said, "Nothing, I am just feeling bad." Neelam was always laughing and playing, then suddenly she seemed so upset, there must be something wrong, we suspected. But she didn't want to tell us. After that we all went back to the club. Even there all the children were dancing but Neelam was sitting alone. We went to her as soon as we got a chance. During our conversation, it came to light that the person who was going to get married was none



other than Neelam. We were shocked to hear this. She is very good in studies, then why was she getting married? She said, you know the condition of my family. The proposal has come from a very wealthy family, so my mother said you won't get such a proposal again and then my family fixed my marriage.

We said, you could have refused the marriage! Neelam said, if I had refused, who was there to listen to me? You know very well how my family is! I was very angry as to why my best friend's family is getting her married. Why can't she study with us? We wanted to say this loudly to everyone, but there was no one there to listen to us.

Suddenly I remembered that we can tell ma'am. We called Ma'am and told her everything and asked her to please help Neelam. After listening to us, ma'am said that we should call Childline. I was scared as I thought this may cause some trouble in my house.

Mam told me that this number was safe and there was no need to be afraid. Then I called Childline 1098 and told them everything about Neelam. They said okay, we are coming. After that Childline people went to Neelam's house and explained to her family. Neelam's marriage was cancelled.

The very next day Neelam came to see me. She looked so happy. She said, 'do you know my family has cancelled the marriage, now they will not get me married soon. I will be allowed to study. Now my dream of becoming a doctor will come true. I can read again. I can go to school.' I was also very happy to see her happy. We both went to school together. There was a strange feeling of happiness inside me that I had done something good.



## From Work To Pen

During Corona, our school, going out, education almost everything had stopped. The routine we were used to follow had stopped completely. The elders had lost their work. At that time, many of my friends left studies due to financial problems and started working. Some left their studies and spent the whole day playing, some got spoiled by falling into bad company. All this continued for many days. One day suddenly that sir and ma'am came. It was a rainy day. Ma'am had gone to my friend's house for survey, then from there my friend brought her to my house. That day sir and ma'am visited the homes of children in our locality and conducted a survey. Later sir and ma'am came and said that from Monday, daily studies will start in the 'Fooler Bagan Club' of our locality. And that too for free!

Hearing this, we were very happy that studying was to continue as well as meeting friends. After that we started going to the centre every day. Here each subject was taught by a different sir and ma'am. We enjoyed going to the centre. Unlike elders at home Sir and ma'am used to listen to us. Here we get a lot of information. We not only got education but also got to know about the rights of the children like the right to life, the right to security, the right to development and the right to participation. All this was explained not only to us but also to our parents.

When we told Sir and Ma'am about our friends who had left their studies, they went to their homes, convinced their parents, and got those children admitted to school. Now they have started coming regularly to the centre for studying. There is a letter box in our centre which is called "Our stories". Ma'am told us that if we are unable to express our wish, happiness or sorrow to anyone, we can write it down on a chit and put it in this box. This box was opened on the first Saturday of every month. While opening the box, two parents, two



students and sir or ma'am used to be present. Ma'am or Sir, read the chits from the box and fulfilled our wishes.

On 8th July, Saturday, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the box was being opened when suddenly at that very moment Mohan called me. Taking permission from Ma'am, I went out and asked Mohan what was the matter. Mohan said that his friend is being forced to work. Though he is very good in studies, he also plays cricket very well, particularly his batting is very good. He is good to be the captain of our cricket team.

I went to Mohan's friend's house. I wanted to meet him. His mother said that he was not at home. I asked where had he gone? His mother said he has gone to work. I told her to please send him to my house whenever he comes back. Mohan's friend came to my house at night. I asked him why he was working at this age. He said that there was shortage of money at home and that is why his father is sending him to work. I said, 'Don't go to work and continue studying.' He said, 'I want to study but I don't think my father will let me study any further.'

Since then, he does not come to play with us and continues to go to work. We really do not like playing cricket without him. Every now and then my other friends and myself try convincing him to leave the job. We told all this to Sir and Ma'am at the centre. Ma'am went and talked to his parents. Explained to them that this was his age to study. He has the right to development and security. Listening to this, his father agreed not to send him to work but after a few days I saw him going to work once again.

I went to the center and saw the Childline number 1098 on the notice board. I thought of calling Childline. After that we friends together called Childline. As soon as we called, the person on phone wanted to know his age, home address and parents' names. We gave them all the information they needed. After that, Childline officer and police went to his house and explained to his parents. His parents now realized that they were making a big mistake. Since then, his father has started sending him to school. Now he also comes to play with us. Now we study in the same school, in the same class.



## Right Path

I am 17 years old. I live in a red-light area. I do not have parents; I live with my grandmother. Our neighborhood is always crowded and strange people keep coming. Liquor is sold there through out the day and some older girls stand on the streets to get customers.

Many people think that all the people living here are the same, but this is not true. Many good people also live here. And, the girls who do bad things (prostitution), do so because they have no other option. Later after coming out of this locality and giving up this work, many children have stood on their own feet and have created their own identity. Rather, I find the behavior of the people coming here from outside is worse. Their bad intentions are written on their face. They think that all the girls here do bad things. I have also been approached by many of them directly or indirectly to do so.

Earlier, when I was little, I did not understand anything, but my Didi (sister) lives in the same neighbourhood. She is not my relative but I have been calling her sister. She does not live in this area; she comes here to teach children. About seven-eight years ago, I had met her when I was studying in school. I had talked to her that I did not like studying. Didi enrolled me in first standard and kept in touch regularly so that I did not drop out. While studying there, I passed secondary and then higher secondary examination. Then I took admission in college. Sometimes I did commit some mistakes but Didi always explained to me and showed me the right path.

Once I was very upset about something and kept wandering without studying. I had made friends in the neighborhood as well as outside the neighborhood. Once two boys from outside, whom I knew, asked me to go with them for a walk. I lied to my grandmother about going



to school and went with them. One of the boys had a bike, so the three of us went for a ride. After a while I felt that they were going somewhere else. Although I did not know the roads outside very well, their expressions and conversation made me suspicious. Then I asked him to stop the bike and I got down. When one of them tried to force himself on me, I started screaming. The place was deserted and since there was no one around, I could not stop them even if I tried. They ran away before the police arrived. Later, I returned home with great difficulty and lodged a complaint with the police. I did this keeping in mind what my Didi had told me.

Perhaps if my sister had not been with me, my condition would have been worse. Now I am studying in college and take training in catering in another place. I help my sister in her work as much as possible. I want to stand on my own feet one day and be like her. I want to help the children from my locality and help them progress.





## I Am Also A Journalist

My name is Kamini. I am currently pursuing Diploma in Mechanical Engineering. I am from U.P. I live in the city of Firozabad. Firozabad city is very famous because of bangles. There are large bangle factories here. Wherever bangles are worn across the country, they are made in Firozabad. Because of the bangles, many people also call it the city of honeymoon. Fancy items are also made here. The city looks very beautiful at night with the lights installed all over the city. There is a market nearby where I live. I love to go there. Here bangle work is also done in homes involving a lot of child labor. There are other types of child labor as well. Perhaps that is why our locality, despite being in Firozabad, is a little different from Firozabad city.

When I was eight years old I was called for a meeting. I didn't know why I was called. I was also a little scared then. When I went there, I saw that there were many children from my locality which made me happy. I made friends with everyone in no time but my first friend was Roshni. We chatted a lot that day. During that meeting we were told about our rights. I was very happy throughout the meeting. After that I also got to know that such meetings would be held every month. Manpal Sir had organized our meeting. I went home and told everything. Told mom that I will go to the meeting every month. Mom asked why? I said this is my right! Don't know why everyone started laughing. After that I started going every month. I used to get new information in the meetings and would come home and tell everything. I also like reading very much.

Once ma'am told us that another ma'am was coming from Jhansi to meet us. Everyone started wondering how that Ma'am would be? I was also wondering how Ma'am would be? I was also feeling a little

scared. Then we started talking. When ma'am came, we all were looking at her. Ma'am introduced herself. She also told us that she has come from Jhansi. I felt very happy meeting her. I was smiling and looking at her all the time. Ma'am us told what a journalist is! She said that journalists write news and are honest. They have the power of truth. Ma'am further said that she will also help one of us from this locality to become a journalist. I was very happy. Ma'am told everyone that you all have to choose one child from among yourself who goes to school, is honest and attends every meeting. I also wanted to become a journalist but I was scared. Probably my face had gone pale but when my friend Roshni asked me what happened, I said no, nothing. Then election was held and I came to know that I was selected to become a journalist. It made me very happy inside. I was so happy that I even thanked God.

I went home and told everyone. Everyone at home started praising me. After a few days we were called for training. When I went there, there were also other children. I went there and started talking to people. After that our training started. We were all very curious. We were told that we will be reporting about children, so we are child journalists. We were told that a child journalist should be honest. He/she goes to school. We were told that we had to write down everything we did. If we help someone then we have to write that story. Our job is to eliminate child labor from our neighborhood. And there is no need to be afraid. We have to make our locality an ideal locality. Anything wrong happening to a child must be stopped. We were also introduced to reporters. They talked to us about many things. They told us that we should become such that everyone appreciates us. Everyone wrote a story of whatever work they had done.

Kamini is my friend living on the same street as mine. At that time, a fair was organized in the city and Navratri was going on, so there was a lot of crowds on the road. Everything was looking great. I was sitting at home when a lot of noise started coming from the street. Some woman was crying. Everyone in my house went out to see what was happening. I also went. I saw that many people were standing on the

street and Upasana's aunt was crying. When I asked my mother, she didn't say anything. Upasana and my friend Nisha were also standing there. When I asked them what happened, Nisha told that Upasana's aunt's little girl was missing since morning and was still not found. Her mother was crying very badly. Everyone was trying to calm her down. Seeing this I too had tears in my eyes. I remembered that when I went to the meeting three days ago, our Sir had told me that the children's helpline number is 1098. He had also said that if any child is lost or exploited, any child is abused then calling this number would get help. I told her uncle to call this number but he did not listen. I told other people but no one listened to me.

A person asked me what were you saying? I told them that I could find the girl but no one was listening to me. Everyone listened to me on his request. I called 1098 from my mom's phone and told them that Mansi was lost. They took all the details. She was four years old and was wearing a blue frock. After that they started searching for her. In between I kept checking with them. At night, two people from Childline brought the girl and after taking some proof from her mother handed over the girl to her. That girl's mother thanked me. Everyone clapped after listening to my story. After that our training ended.

On completion of the training, we helped our friends from our locality to become child journalists so that we can easily know when there is any problem in our locality, we all together can solve it. Sometimes, when we feel scared, our parents also support us. I and our children's group want to make our locality an ideal locality and make the entire Firozabad a child labour free city.



## Learning Continues

I was not aware of what a social organization is? Who are the people who form the organization? All I knew was that the organization works for poor people.

When we start working at the community level, no one answers us. We are the only two youth who are actively associated with our organization. We wanted to involve more youth in our group. Accordingly, we also started talking to other youth and tried to convince them to join our group and work together to improve our area. But today's generation is so confused that they don't know what they want to do. We tried to bring the youth together with whom we could brainstorm to gain more clarity on community development.

I explained to them about the Sports Day and they started taking interest in playing youth sport i.e. Kabaddi. From then on we gathered every day and started practicing Kabaddi for the annual sports day. Gradually we started discussing our problems/issues regarding our area. It was during the practice session that we became friends and started discussing many issues about the locality. Since we were not adults, we were not allowed to discuss any issues of our area. This was the mentality of the elders living in our area.

When we started addressing people's identity documents, small issues, we realized that most people did not have these basic documents. We advocated opening of post office and e-service center to help them get basic documents like caste certificate, Aadhar-card, domicile certificate, income certificate etc. Only then did people started believing in us.

Now we started focusing on other issues like speed breakers, water and sanitation. Our locality is along the highway. As a result, we have

to often face road accidents. Recently a person from our area died on the spot because of such road accident. We expressed our concerns in writing to our corporator. Now speed breakers have been installed and that has reduced road accidents in our area. We resolved the problems by filing online complaints in PMC. Then was no drinking water in our locality for six months, for which we lodged a written complaint with our corporator, who promised to solve the problem within two days, but did nothing. Then we approached PMC. Filed an online complaint yet no action was taken to resolve the issue. Our youth group gathered all the people from our locality, explained to them the need to protest. Asked them to join our protest so that the water problem could be solved. We then protested on the road and within two hours PMC officials came to talk to us. They also promised to lay a new water pipeline connection. At present half the work has been completed and the remaining work is in progress. Till the job is not completed, we are getting water tankers from PMC. We do such work and we would like to continue this practice in the future. We believe that the youth have the strength and ability to tackle any challenge that comes their way.





## Dream Of Moving Forward

Among all the areas of Kolkata which are sensitive about certain issues, there is a girl from one such area, Malini, who has just crossed the school boundary and entered college. This enthusiastic girl has been struggling with various problems of the area since a young age. Girls' education is considered a luxury in these areas. Still, she continues to dream of moving forward in the face of threats, accusive glances and taunts from the people. Because of her struggles from an early age, she is some what different from the other five children in the area. She often noticed that many of the girls who were her classmates got married even before they finished school. Although they did attend school after marriage, it was just for a few days. After marriage they got trapped in "family work responsibilities". Malini was surprised and thought, then what was the benefit of studying in school?

All these keeps revolving in her mind. She felt that if she tells this to anyone, they will laugh at her, calling her crazy or an alien. Even then even at home, the same thoughts kept coming to Malini's mind again and again, "How can this trend be stopped?" She did not give up. Every day, while eating and drinking, in her free time, in the crowd and among her school-college friends, the faces of her married classmates kept coming to her mind. How quickly those faces turned from being a child to being a teenager? She got scared. Imagining so many hurdles, she too will have to swim against such a current! She doesn't see a way out. Just thinking about this makes her sleepy.

That morning was something different. The rain had stopped and the sunny morning fell on her face through the window. She was a little irritated but not unhappy. She got up with a firm resolve. After a long time, she had got a chance to participate in a workshop of a voluntary organization. She had been wanting to participate in it for a long time.

She got ready quickly, somehow had her meal, made two braids and left home for the venue.

There were only familiar faces over there, familiar houses from the neighborhood. She was going there after so long...The program started on time. There was a small discussion on child rights. She liked this discussion. Suddenly a thought came to her mind. As soon as the workshop was over, she ran towards school. Straight to the teacher's house.

Everyone was surprised to see her there. Has something gone wrong? No! nothing like that! Calming down a bit, she said directly to Didi - Do you know how many school girls get married even before joining school and completely miss the opportunity to study?

Madam- Oh so have you come to give this news? Why are you so hassled?

Malini - No didi, I know why they do this! In this society they don't know their own rights; they don't know what the consequences will be.

Many days have passed. Malini now regularly visits various schools with her friends to conduct school awareness programs to discuss child marriage and its consequences. To some extent, she has been successful in making the people around her aware about the issues.

According to Malini getting education is not just about going to school, but true education means getting information about your rights and implementing them in your life and making efforts for positive change in the society.





## Solidarity During Corona

In a small village in West Bengal, we were a group of ordinary children leading a routine life. Waking up early, studying, going to school and playing sports – this was our daily life. Little did we know that a new journey was waiting for us.

In 2019, one sir and a madam from an organization arrived in our village. Their aim was to create a team of small children who could become agents of positive change in the village. We started attending the meetings organized by them. We learned about various social issues, gender issues, how to protect ourselves. In this meeting there were some deep revelations within each of us. We found that each of us has many qualities, including leadership abilities. As our confidence grew, we realized that we had the power to create positive change not only in our lives but also in our community.

Then came 2021, and with it, the COVID-19 pandemic began. The world was in turmoil, and our community was no exception. Everyone was struggling with no source of income, and food prices were going up. We did not become silent spectators; we sprang into action. We partnered with a voluntary organization to plan relief distribution. Together, we identified the most vulnerable households, single female-headed households. We started distributing food among these families. Later we realized that its impact was very deep. The hungry families started getting food in their plates. Some people even shed tears of gratitude while enjoying their food.

These experiences reshaped our perspective. We realized that we could do something good for our community.



## The Magic Of Soil

We were not able to move around freely during the Covid lock down. We were not even allowed to play on the ground. We could not go to the market with my mother to buy vegetables. So, we decided to take up kitchen gardening. In the small backyard of my house, I discovered a world of wonders hidden beneath the soil. We planned to collect some seeds and sow them in the soil to create a magical place called a kitchen garden.

Then we all worked together for leveling the ground for some time. After that our mother gave us chili, brinjal and ginger seeds. We all sowed the seeds row by row. We used cow dung as fertilizer. Gradually we were able to transform a small little piece of land into a beautiful looking kitchen garden. We watered the sown seeds regularly and left them to grow.

We thought that when we would wake up the next morning, we would see whether anything has happened to the seeds or not. We were all excited to see the sprouted seeds. After a week a small sapling of chili seeds arrived. We started taking care of that plant. We started watering the plant daily. When my friends visited me, we started discussing the mystery of plants and vegetables.

The atmosphere was filled with excitement. I decided to document this journey of life and growth. Clicking pictures became a daily ritual. After a few days, all three species of plants started growing row by row. All of us together removed the weeds and grass growing around it and created kind of a compound around it so that no harm can be caused to the plants. Days turned into weeks, and then that magical moment came – the beauty of the colors appeared in the form of delicate flowers. It seemed as if the garden was smiling. My heart

swelled with pride. After a long time, chilies have started growing on the chilli plants. The brinjal plant also grew big. We had to place a stick near the plant to help it stand and not come down on the ground and die.

Then the day came when we all plucked vegetables. This happiness was incomparable. It was as if we got the fruits of the labour we had put in. We stepped into the kitchen together. Some of us cut the vegetables while others washed them and kept them on the stove to cook. We would stir the vegetables of and on with the ladle. As soon as the vegetables were ready, my mother decorated the table with delicacies prepared from our own kitchen garden. We all had dinner together. This shared meal was full of our friendship, our shared hard work and our memories.





## Story About Learning

Our colony is in Hyderabad city of Telangana. We 12 children have now become a children's group. It all started when Didi of an organization came to our colony and met us and our parents three-four times. We became part of the Children's Club to learn about our rights. We are sharing our story with you.

When we formed this group in our colony, the first thing we discussed among ourselves was why we should form this group, what topics we should discuss and what we should learn. The children's club was formed in July 2023. Since then, we get together once a week. We enjoy the time we spend together at children's club.

Last year, we all were a part of a training where we learnt about Child Marriage Prohibition Act (2006); Got to know about Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012), and Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act. We understood those laws in depth. In our club, we discussed the need for all the children to be safe and have equal opportunities for their development. Earlier we had learned about the importance of child rights and education in our children's club, while in these meetings, we also identified the issues that slum children face. We understood that children must go to school for a better future. They should not be made to work too much while studying. In school, children should not be beaten, scolded or insulted by teachers; instead children should be properly explained what is right and what is wrong. We also learnt that girls should not get married before the age of 18 and the problems caused because of early marriage.

While discussing whether there were any children in our colony who do not go to school, we learned that a girl and her brother from our children's club had stopped going to school. These children were studying in a private school, but their parents could not afford

the school fees and the principal was not giving the school leaving certificate. As a result, they could not take admission in another school either. Didi of the organization met the parents of the children and informed the Child Protection Committee of the area. She took the children along with their parents and met the principal of the private school, who then agreed to give the required certificate after the meeting. Later Didi requested the headmaster of the government school to admit both these children to the government school. Now both the children are going to school regularly.





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