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Slum kids' dogged pursuit makes them graduates

Children Of Daily Labourers And Domestic Workers, They Got NGO Backing And Supportive Classmates

Shreya Roy Chowdhury | TNN

New Delhi: That they were able to finish school is a big deal. That they entered college and completed their studies is an even bigger one. Twenty-nine students from different slums in Delhi had joined colleges — public and private — in 2008; one dropped out but the remaining 28 graduate this year.

Supported by the Delhi-based NGO Asha, they are the first in their families to go to college, collect degrees, take education loans and stay in hostels. The sons and daughters of construction labourers and domestic workers have emerged as graduates and dreamers.

Rajender Das, 22, completed his Hindi (honours) course at Ram Lal Anand (evening) with a 48.5%. He hasn't cleared any of the entrance tests for mass communication and BED he has written but he's still chipper. He had never written an entrance exam before. "We didn't know what entrance exams were like," he says. Neither his daily-labourer father nor his mother finished school. "I consider them educated," says Das, "They en-



Piyal Bhattacharjee

DREAMING BIG: These determined children were able to go to college, collect degrees, take education loans and stay in hostels

couraged me." His MA entrance test results are awaited; he hopes to teach.

Entering college isn't all that easy for them as they are stepping on a terrain no one in their families has trodden before. They also have to

learn to fit in. "We are told how to dress, how to talk and carry ourselves by Asha. We're taught English," says Usha from Ekta Vihar who joined Maitreyi College in 2010. Currently, Asha is putting 600 students through col-

lege, of which 183 took admission this year.

Most of those who joined, however, found that their fears were largely unfounded. Their classmates — all from different backgrounds — were supportive. "In the

three years I spent at RLA, I didn't tell anyone I live in the slums," says Diwakar Thakur. He studied BA Programme. When his Ekta Vihar origins were discovered, classmates were merely surprised.

"I thought they would know more, be proud. They come from a different level," says Diwakar, "But they asked for help with assignments. We'd hang out." There were limits to socializing though. "Sometimes they'd want to party and I'd refuse. *Thoda manage karna padta hai.*" (You have to manage a little) "They don't get to know," says Mahender, currently studying engineering at a private institute in Noida, "The only difference is that I studied in a government school and carry *roti* from home." With a standard family income of Rs 100—200 a day, pocket money is always in short supply.

Rohit Sharma was the first in the group to take an education loan. Asha facilitated the loan and he got Rs 2 lakh for a course in animation. Those dwelling in slums have nothing to offer as surety. Others have taken loans since Mahesh is studying engineering physics at Delhi Technological University on a student loan. Ambedkar Basti, with its narrow, unpaved paths that "turn into drains during the rains", families spilling out of tiny huts and poultry walking

free, is no environment to study nanotechnology in. Mahesh, whose mother works as a cleaner, stayed at the hostel for the first year, sharing a room with "an NRI". "I had my own table and dresser. It was great," he says.

Parents agree to their sons studying more readily. "The pressure to get married is building," says Santosh Bairva. She's earned an honours degree in political science with a 56%, sailed through the entrance test for a master's, but is holding out for the BED course. Her family thinks she's ready for marriage now that she's a graduate. Santosh disagrees. "I want to make something of my life first."

"The counselling at Asha made us confident," says Renu Kalra from Azad basti. Dilip Singh has studied in Hindi-medium all along. He didn't score enough in the language to be allowed to study political science in Hindi at ARSD but English was open to him.

Dilip told them, "*Koi nahin. Kar loonga English mein.*" (Never mind, I'll study in English.)

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