



On the Record: Global Movement for Children

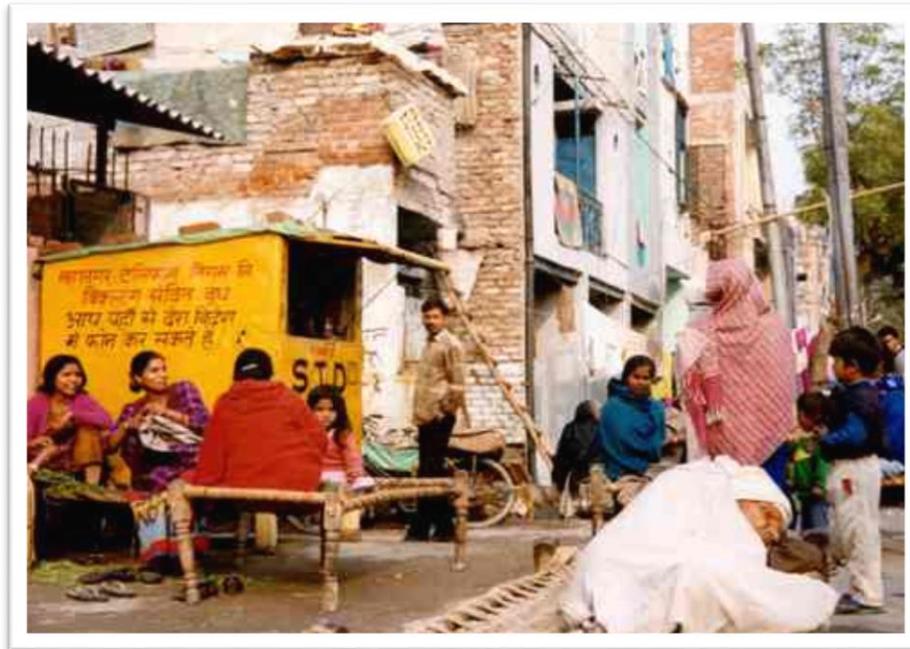
Issue 3: Education in the Slums

From the AP Editorial Desk

If you ask any of the children gathered in Sudha Nantiyan's media workshop about the ten "Say Yes" imperatives, they will effortlessly recite each one by heart. Ask them how they apply these principles to their everyday life and you'll get blank stares and awkward silences.

The reason is that like most children throughout India, much of their life is beyond their control. Twelve year-old Nirmal tells of his friend who was made to drop out of school and take up a job when her father became ill. Ten year-old Heena recalls a similar story of a girl friend whose father passed away. Her mother, who worked as a washerwoman, had to pull her children out of school and put them in jobs just to make ends meet.

The challenge of poverty is familiar to the children who live in the slum resettlement community of Seemapuri, in East Delhi. A few lucky ones are able to attend Sudha Nantiyan's workshop.



Run by the Center for Advocacy and Research, it takes place in a small room up above an alleyway in a government housing colony. The government resettled all of the people in this colony when the slum was razed for new construction. Though the surrounding streets are typical of the dirt and chaos of Indian slums, this government complex is relatively clean and the homes are well maintained.

Sudha Nantiyan provides work, school, and a refuge from slums.

Up on the walls where Nantiyan holds her workshop, images of Indian prosperity fill the children's artwork. Bollywood movie stars, fancy clothes and jewelry, pictures of models, magazine cut-outs of upper class living rooms, and imported foreign goods – this is the world that Nantiyan's students aspire to.

Most of their parents are shop owners or domestic servants. They are also no strangers to hard work. Each of the approximately twelve children in the after-school workshop either is or has known a child laborer. Niraj and Kanchan, two children who used to come to this study group, left one month ago to work in their parents' shop.

And though each child attends public school, wears clean and proper clothes, and can count on at least one nutritious meal a day, they remain vulnerable to the abuse, lack of nutrition and poverty that afflict the typical Indian child. And as the following article makes very clear, school is not always a source of support.

SCHOOL CAN BE TOUGH

The children who attend Sudha Nantiyan's workshop make it clear that school brings little relief from the pressures of life, and the demands of work.

Out of the seven boys attending the workshop when I visited, four say they regularly get slapped and beaten by their schoolteachers. Government schools, the children say, are places where they can be sure their rights will be violated. "There's no toilet for kids in our school," says Nirmal. "There's only one for the teacher and she keeps it locked. So all of us have to go to the bathroom behind the school where things are very unclean. The teacher also makes us wait two to three hours before we go to the bathroom. Most of the younger children can't hold it in and they go in their pants during class."

When I ask if anyone has told their parents or school officials about these conditions, they point out that even if their parents complain, the teacher says it won't happen again but continues to do exactly as he or she pleases.

Things only get worse in the summertime, when the heat reaches 100 degrees and concentration becomes impossible. "Some of our classmates faint in the heat or go unconscious," says one girl.

EDUCATE EVERY CHILD

- 59 million of Indian children are not in school and are most likely at work.
- 37 percent of children drop out before completing five years of schooling
- 57 percent of children finish five years of schooling
- 95 percent of children are within one kilometer of a primary school
- 35 million girls do not go to school
- Approximately 63 million children in India between the ages of 6-14 are illiterate
- Some 460 million Indians cannot read and write and that includes almost 58 percent of women and girls
- The total literacy rate in India is 65 percent.
- The male literacy rate is 76 percent and the female rate is 54 percent.
- 82 percent of girls and 100 percent of boys are enrolled in primary school
- 49 percent of girls and 65 percent of boys are enrolled in secondary school

"If there's a fan, the teacher only puts it on himself and we suffer in the heat. If we speak up, we get beaten."

Another girl reports that her teacher makes the students fan her when it gets hot and if they complain or fan themselves, they get beaten.

Many of the government schools attended by children like these have few classrooms and never enough space. Children may have to sit outside year-round, and that means learning is the last thing on their minds. There is no first aid available when a child gets hurt. Children who are late to class because they live far away can expect to be scolded and beaten when they finally arrive.



Taking a break: Sudha Nantiyan at the Seemapuri resettlement colony.

Ten year-old Sheika says her teacher makes the students sweep the floor and bring juice and cookies to class for everyone. Sometimes, she says, the teacher brings her own children to class and makes her students entertain them.

It will become more urgent to fix these problems in government schools as the government moves forward on a bill that lists primary education as a child's inalienable right. The bill has already been passed in the Lok Sabha, the lower house, and is set to be accepted by the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House.

Some critics feel the bill does not go far enough, but they view it as a step in the right direction. "The bill doesn't address the quality of the education provided or the conditions of the school," points out Raaj Mangal Prasad, President of the New Delhi-based Association for Development. "There's also nothing about care for children below the age of six – and it just isn't practical to say that only the parents are responsible for children's welfare during the early years of life. But at least the 'Right to Education' bill is asserting a child's right to receive a basic education. That, at least is a start."

