Getting Saksham

PRAYATN
Struggle for a Dawn of Change
Getting Saksham

A compilation of community initiatives on Child Right Protection

A joint initiative of

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Acknowledgement

India is the most populated democratic nation of the world and Uttar Pradesh is the most populated state of this country. Longest river of India, also known as the national river, the Ganga and the Yamuna along with other tributaries are the only source of water in this state. Presence of these perennial rivers, plane land and fertile soil makes this belt worthwhile for agriculture. But due to its high population density (828 per square kilometer; according to the 2011 census) and low rate of development, this city is home for maximum number of poor families of the nation. Medical and education facilities are deplorable. The state, with the maximum number of schedule caste population (21% of the total population, according to the census 2001), has the infant mortality rate, 67 (according to S.R.S 2008) whereas maternal mortality rate of this state is 359 (according to S.R.S 2011). According to a report of the Education department, around 26 lac children, aged between 6 and 14, are deprived of the basic education. At primary level, teacher student ratio is 53.25. In all, from the developmental point of view, Uttar Pradesh’s condition is bothersome.

Varanasi is one of the 71 districts of Uttar Pradesh, fighting against under development. Due to the incredible historic, cultural, sacred and educational legacy, Varanasi district has a conspicuous mark on the world map. This city, located at the bank of river Ganga, is honored as the oldest surviving city of the world. On one hand, where several temples and ashrams built on the river bank, draw the attention of lakhs of Hindu pilgrims every year, the same way, nearby situated Sarnath, is an acknowledged sacred place for Buddhist disciples.

Apart from these wharfs, temples, ashrams and religious and spiritual enlightenment it has a darker side also which makes this city far more piteous than others and it is poverty which is being faced by the majority of its population residing in the slum areas. Most of them, either beggers or rag pickers or rickshaw pullers or are involved in some or the other kind of labour. Poverty reflects from withered faces of children. These are the children of the unemployed parents; who either have no dignified source of earning to run their livelihood and the ones who have become incapable of doing anything due to leprosy or illiteracy or are homeless or the ones who are miles away from community and economic development. Many of the children are orphans too.
Even in rural areas of Varanasi, a large number of children are facing the similar kind of situation. Due to poverty, illiteracy lack of government facilities these children are bound to work as child labourers in either agricultural fields or brick kilns or masonry and sometimes these children go to cities also; where they work as lamp bearers in marriage processions. And even if a child is not working, he is still deprived of his rights due to the deplorable healthcare and educational facilities and social disparities like racial and gender based discrimination. These children are also the victims of child abuse and violation.

When ‘Prayatn’ came across this predicament condition of children of Varanasi, it decided to understand their issues and work for their betterment. Matters related to child rights, especially those concerning child protection, were taken on priority and were looked into. An extremely bothersome situation came out which showed that maximum number of children were facing exploitation. In such a situation, it was needed to work for the conservation of child rights for these children, from their Right to Survival and Right to Development to their Right to Protection and Right to Participation. This need gave birth to “Saksham” project.

Saksham project is the one specially focused on child rights and its main objective is to make deprived children, community people and local administration efficient and sensitized so that no more child remains underprivileged. In this project, which had started in the year 2008, on one hand, children home for 100 homeless boys and girls was supported, on the other, under this project we also worked on similar issues at community level in around 30 villages of Charaigaon and Cholapur block each and around 40 urban slums in Varanasi district. Later on, the project was extended to the neighboring district, Bhadohi also. On one hand, where this project was successful in developing an understanding of child rights among the community members, on the other hand this project also lead to improvement and regularization the facilities of government school, Anganbadi Center, water supply and other healthcare facilities which ultimately led to the betterment of their education, nutrition, health etc. Apart from all these developments, “Saksham” was also successful in developing a fearless and discrimination devoid environment everywhere including school and community, and children’s participation was well taken care of. Consequently, a remarkable downfall has been seen in child labour also.
To bring about this project successfully, we were encouraged by various sections of the society. Be it children; for whom and with the support of whom we successfully brought about this project, be it there parents and other community members who also came up their strong support, or the teachers, the Anganbadi workers, Asha helpers, Police personnel, administrative officers, workers of other locally functional organizations and media personnel, without the support of even one of these, it was not possible to bring about these sustainable changes. We are grateful to the international agencies, Back to life and Earnst & Young, for not only providing us the financial support but also for time to time supervision.

We sincerely thank the Founder member of Back to Life and Miss Tara Stella Deetjen who enlightened our work through her contribution.

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Apart from this there is a category of people who are pillars of the project and they are the project team. There were lots of other members who associated themselves with the “Saksham” and contributed their efforts to take it forward. Associates like Dr. Manoj Kumar and Mrs. Chanda have been associated with the project with dedication since its beginning. Mr. Hakim Manjhi and Mr. Mahendra Kumar, on the other hand, helped in laying strong foundation which proved to be very useful for members who joined later. Timely inputs of experienced team members of Prayatn - Mr. Manish Singh, Mr. Devendra Singh, Mr. Dharmendra Shukla and Mr. Ram Khiladi Poswal, helped in leading the project team towards right direction. The present team, which consists of young dynamic leaders - Mr. Manab, Mr. Amrendra, Ms. Somyashree - and ten other community organizers also deserves deep appreciation.

Finally we would like to thank the team members who have put in their efforts for compilation, editing and publishing this booklet. The foremost name in this regard is of our veteran associate Mr. Ram Prasad Jangid, who, with his vast experience
of grassroot level working, analyzed all the incidences of success that were shared
by the project team members and converted them into inspiring stories with his
remarkable knack of writing. His excellent manuscript was then developed into a
complete publishable document by the members of Prayatn’s documentation and
publication cell which included Mr. Yogesh Jain, Mr. Ashraf Alam and Ms. Gauri Singh.
The efforts of this team as well as those who were directly or indirectly involved in
this process and still remained unnamed here also deserve due appreciation.

It is hoped that all the efforts by these people will not only prove to be appealing to you
and but will also aid in ensuring rights of the children through better understanding
of experiences and sharing them and thus taking the cause further.

Thanking You

Malay Kumar

Chief Executive
Our Working Approach

Prayatn prefers rights based approach over need based approach of development. This is because the impact of the rights based approach is on much wider scale than that of the need based approach which remains limited to a particular community. Secondly, rights based approach provides opportunity of understanding the role of dutybearers towards the right holders and harnessing available constitutional spaces so as to ensure sustainable development.

As far as children are concerned, the approach adopted by Prayatn is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989. Accordingly, Children’s Right to Participation has been considered as pivotal while addressing the other three categories of their rights – Right to Survival, Right to Development, Right to Protection. This has been ensured through constitution of children collectives namely Bal Manch at habitation level.

Bal Manch

Child participation is defined as ‘a process of active, meaningful and all-inclusive involvement of children in influencing decisions and issues affecting their lives’. Good practices of child participation begin with real attentive listening to children rather than with applying ‘blue print’ participatory techniques. Child – adult interaction is the first area to gain for child participation. Child participation is an ongoing process. It does not need to be perfect from the start, but needs a gradual process to get children prepared. It is considered essential for a successful child-centered community development process.

Recognizing children as the main actors in the process of making a reducing their problems, Prayatn started its work by facilitating formation of Bal Manch (BM). A Bal Manch is a habitation level children’s collective which has a membership of 25 to 50 children who gather to discuss problems that they face at home, in the village, or in school. The collective provides a platform for children to share their feelings and support each other. These forums have been provided with capacity building inputs and platforms for participation in discussion of matters related to them. They hold meetings at least once a month to share the progress and decide
for a roadmap for the future. The monthly meetings also provide an opportunity to its members for expression, entertainment, education and engagement with broader development processes. Initially the meetings are facilitated by Prayatn team member. Then budding young leaders take up the driver seat. In some of these although no conscious efforts were made, Bal Manches have acquired institutional structure with specifically defined roles of office bearers.

Bal Manches have contributed a lot in terms of creating a child friendly environment in respective villages. There are also a good number of cases where the Bal Manch as a group has provided peer support to children to overcome their problems. Nevertheless, the BMs are a part of an external environment full of adults and their institutions. Since beginning there is clarity that the children should not “replace” the role of an adult. There are mechanisms that ensure that the problem being indentified by children is shared with adults. From this point, the adults take care of the issue.

Children-led indicator development

At the beginning of the initiative Prayatn team went through training on method of child centered situation analysis. This laid stress on ensuring that the situation is understood through eyes of a child. Learning from other experiences the process later termed child led indicator development process. The team along with children developed a list of indicators for the baseline assessment of the situation of children vis-à-vis children’s rights, abuse, exploitation, and most importantly school environment. The Bal Manch members collected the data and ranked each of the indicators on a scale of 0-10. The indicators are reviewed by children on a periodic basis. For review the members of Bal Manch discuss the situation and try to analyze the change against each of the indicator and rank them afresh. At times, there are new indicators added in the list. The prioritization contributed in developing future course of action of the programme.

Baal Adhikar Manch

A Bal Adhikar Manch (BAM) is a forum of elderly members of the village. BAM as an institution is mandated to work on issues of the rights of the child and to ensure
that a child friendly environment is established in the concerned village. BAM is having a membership of 15-20 people. The BAM has been provided with a number of inputs related to human and institutional capacity enhancement. Gradually, BAM is emerging as a representative body of the village and has started taking up broader developmental issues such road, electricity and water. With the knowledge and skills gained, the BAM members have now been nominated to several village level committees responsible to ensure better implementation of child development programs. A number of community based systems and mechanisms have also been developed by BAM towards protection and promotion of the rights of the child. The BAM do have an operational linkage with the structures of local self governance i.e. the Panchayati Raj Institutions. This relationship helps the BAM to take forward the issues of children to the departments accountable for providing services to the child.

Social systems

Bal Adhikar Manches in order to protect the rights of the children, have formed and have been forming various social systems. Correspondingly, a lot of resolutions have been adopted and rules have been framed. Some of them are as follows:-

Resolutions

1. Ensure that all children and adults know children's rights well.
2. Prioritize the best interest of the child in the village agenda.
3. Promote children's right to go to school and ensuring quality food in the mid-day meals at schools.
4. Stop gambling in the community and never accept any form of child abuse and violation of children's rights.
5. Cooperate with all people, government institutions, and non-governmental institutions to help children to access needed services.
Rules

1. Organizing meetings for Bal Adhikar Manch and ensuring their attendance and participation.

2. Regular monitoring of schools and Anganwadi centre by the community representatives.

3. Taking action against people violating child rights and getting people punished who are involved in gambling and alcoholism with the help of police.

4. To bear the expenses of ensuring the rights of the child by establishing a community corpus.

Partial use of Needs based Approach in Saksham

Saksham Programme is basically framed on the rights based approach but some part of need based approach is also included in it, the reason being the compensation of the gap as the impact of the approach will take a longer time to be implemented in the community. We know that opportunity of gain in health and education lost during such a delay cannot compensated for in future easily. Therefore, while health camps were organized in villages and slums for both children and adults time and again, informal schools were opened for those living in urban slums where no available school facility appeared to be accessible. Giving shelter to the homeless children and providing medical and economic support to the poor families is also part of such support. But then it should be understood that the element of spreading awareness about the various rights and eventually linking this to the government and social support systems in the community was included in all such initiatives.

The stories presented in this publication will clarify this use of this mixed approach further. We therefore request all of you to spare some more time and continue reading.
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1. Yes, they too can access public services...

Sheela, a student of class V of the Government Primary School of Rustampur village, was suffering from diarrhea since last three days because of which she was unable to attend her school also. The girl is good at studies and her teachers are happy with her hard work and dedication. Her absence, especially when the annual examinations were getting due within a week, was therefore a matter of concern for them. The school teachers, therefore asked her well being from her father, Shri Ram Bahadur, and asked him get her treated soon.

Ram Bahadur was, till date, applying home based remedies and hadn't approach any doctor. But when he came to know about the annual examinations, he got worried and rushed to a nearby private doctor, explained him the situation and requested quick treatment.

The doctor checked up Sheela properly and prescribed a course of medicines for her. He assured Ram Bahadur that his daughter will regain her health soon but cautioned them to avoid consumption of contaminated food and water, which according to him
was the main cause of Sheela’s illness. He advised Ram Bahadur to use only boiled and then filtered water for the purpose of drinking.

As indicated earlier, this case is of Rustampur village which is located in Chiraigaon block of Varanasi district. This village has 800 families a total population of 10,000 people who belong to different communities. Rustampur is 4 km far from the block headquarter and 10 km far from the district headquarter. Agriculture, animal husbandry and labour are the main occupations for dwellers of the village.

Ram Bahadur lives in the Harijan Basti (habitation of a scheduled caste) of Rustampur village, which mainly depends on labour as their primary occupation. The only source of potable water in the habitation was a hand pump that too was surrounded by squalor and all slushy material. As such, the water drawn from the hand pump used to get contaminated resulting in different types of water-borne diseases among the inhabitants especially children.

Sheela had regained her well-being after the complete treatment and had started going to her school. Ram Bahadur continued to be cautious on the matter and decided to discuss the issue of non-availability of drinking water of adequate quality in the village in the next Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting.

In the Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting, Ram Bahadur initiated discussion on the issue and told what the doctor had told in her daughter’s case. Seeta Devi, Indravati, Bhagwan Das and Munshi took the discussion forward with dissatisfaction and concern, “When micro-planning was undertaken, availability of potable drinking water emerged as our most pressing problem but we haven’t been able to take any action. Mere talking won’t suffice. We need to take some action.”

The meeting concluded with a decision that Ram Bahadur, Bhagwan Das and Indravati would take the issue to the Pradhan so that a solution could be worked.

Next day, all of met with the Pradhan, they received assurance but nothing happened. They went to him again. This time his reply was disappointing, “I can’t do any help. Talk with higher authorities.”

Bal Adhikaar Manch members were aware what step they should take now. They had already discussed such possibilities in advance. They immediately prepared an
application addressed to the Block Development Officer (BDO). Details including spread of diseases in the habitation as well as request for installation of new hand pump in a safer place were included in the application. Representatives of all the aggrieved families signed application.

Ram Bahadur, Bhagwan Das and Indravati again took up the responsibility and went to the BDO. Here too, they received assurance of prompt resolution of the problem and here too the assurance was not fulfilled. After waiting for ten days, they again went to the BDO.

As soon as the BDO saw the community representatives again, he realized that the community is very serious about the problem and he too needs to be so. He asked them to wait for one more week and assured with greater stress that the commitment will be fulfilled this time.

Community members gave consideration to BDOs request and decided to wait for another week. They in the meantime decided the further course of action in case the assurance was still not followed.

This time, the assurance was fulfilled. A team from the concerned department visited the habitation and installed a new hand pump at the place which was decided by the villagers themselves. People have started getting water from it.

Community members are now feeling happy and relieved. They are now sure that no children will be required to leave school because of diarrhea. Nor will they themselves suffer. They have now started feeling that public services are available not just to upper caste and well off people, but also to poor lower caste people like them. They too can now avail government services.

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2. A dose of Awareness

Today, when Prayatn team member came to the basti (habitation), Raseena Bibi, Sarifa and Gudiya joined her on the way. They saw a woman of the same slum carrying around 2 to 2.5 years old girl who was coughing very badly. The face of the girl had turned red and was crying. Mother was trying to bring her at peace and feed her nothing was working.

“Why is the girl crying? Is something wrong?” the staff member enquired.

“I don’t know,” the mother replied.

The staff member then enquired about vaccination of children in the habitation. Raseena Bibi straight away reciprocated “Nobody ever goes for vaccination in this basti” and to establish her reply she asked, “What good does a vaccination do? In fact, it results in further complications like fever and infection. This is what we have heard so far”.

Raseena Bibi, Sarifa and Gudiya are members of the Bal Adhikaar Manch. While the colloquy was on, a few more women joined the group. Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting was also scheduled for today. It began, with a discussion on the issue of vaccination of the children. The main reasons for this heedlessness were lack of awareness and misconceptions regarding vaccination. So a detailed discussion was held on need of vaccination, its importance and facilities available in the village, related to vaccinations, were the hot topics of discussion in today’s meeting. Women and other people of the village accepted the need and importance but it was difficult to say whether they were serious or not.

To clear all the doubts and perturbations, at the end of the meeting it was decided that the next day Raseena Bibi, Gudia and Sarifa along with the staff member will visit the nearby Primary Health Centre (PHC) in order to clear all their doubts.

The habitation, which is being talked about in this case is a slum, situated in Varanasi district and is known as Nayi Basti, 2 and 3. With 256 families residing in this slum, its population is around 600. These families belong to Muslim community and have immigrated from West Bengal in search of work and have later settled here.
in this slum. Majority of these people are working as rag-pickers while others pull rickshaws to earn their livelihood. They say, “We don’t get any employment in West Bengal. We are illiterate as well. Therefore we are here. We don’t know any other work. So we don’t have any options.”

The staff member reached the basti on the pre-decided time. The three ladies Raseena Bibi, Gudiya and Sarefa) were ready. All the four went to the PHC and met with the A.N.M. Kiran ji, who is responsible for the basti. The staff member told Kiran ji about the complete scenario of illusions related to health and vaccination in the basti and requested her to clear them.

Kiran ji undertook it as her responsibility and gave detailed information on importance of vaccination for children & pregnant women, schedule of vaccination. She took help of various visual means for this purpose. She also detailed what facilities are available at the PHC so that community members are able to make use them whenever required. She told about the Re 1 slip also which is required to be made whenever they visited the health centre. In the end, it was decided that, A.N.M. will take a round of the basti on the last Wednesday of every month.

The women were well convinced when they left the PHC. They informed everybody about ANM’s decision to visit the basti and advised them to be present on the day and take maximum benefit of the visit.

Vaccination began in the basti. Initially 7 girls and 2 boys availed it. It was decided that the Bal Adhikaar Manch will keep a watch that no child or pregnant woman remains deprived of vaccination.

Awareness is like fragrance. It does not remain limited to one person or area alone. It spreads limitlessly. Awareness on vaccination spread to other nearby bastis as well. As a result, vaccination started in Nayi Basti 4 & Bhagwa Nala as well and 5 children were vaccinated in both of these slums. The dose of communal awareness and sensitization had started showing its effect.

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3. Cycling towards Horizon

Results of class 5 annual examinations were out. Pooja, who was clinquant on academic front, had cleared her exams with admirable marks. Her friends had also come up with flying colors. But there was one question that was bothering all these girls and had made them sad in spite of the awe-inspiring result. The question was, “How will we study further?”

“Our parents do not believe in getting we educated further after class 5, going out to the other village for studies seems just next to impossible,” one of the girls rolled her eyes and said with a sense of disappointment in her voice when the issue was discussed in the Bal Manch of the village.

Paranapur is a small village in Cholapur block of Varanasi district. It is 8 km far from Cholapur and 13 km fare from Varanasi. Total population of this village is 600 and it includes Brahmin, Yadav and Harijan communities. Their primary source of income is agriculture and animal husbandry.

Paranapur has school only till grade five. For further studies, students are required to take admission in the Pre-Secondary School, Chaubeypur, which is 3 k.m. far from the village.

Both Bal Manch, as well as, Bal Adhikaar Manch have been constituted in the village. All these girls are the active members of Bal Manch. Problems in achieving further education after class 5 have always been an important issue but a solution to this problem has not been worked out yet.

Pooja belongs to a poor Harijan (Scheduled Caste) family whose only income is only about Rs 15-16,000 a year. Her father, Phool Chand, is a labourer and mother is a house wife. But still, Phool Chand is an active and responsible member of Bal Adhikaar Manch. He was already aware of the child rights and importance of education in her life as he had attended trainings on Child Rights and Good Quality Education that were organized by Prayatn for Bal Adhikaar Manch members. But like others the barrier of distance with no accompaniment was worrying him too. Knowing Pooja’s Right to Participation, he thought he should discuss the issue with her.
“Don’t worry, father! I’ll ride down to the school on bicycle” Pooja said with confidence.

Phool Chand was surprised on seeing the confidence of his 10 year old daughter. At the same time he felt relieved because he knew that his daughter knows cycling well and can cycle down to Chaubeypur for further studies. He appreciated and encouraged the little girl saying that he is proud of her. Pooja took admission in the school in Chaubeypur and started going their regularly.

Soon Phool Chand got her admitted in the upper primary school, Chaubeypur, where she is regularly attending her classes.

Issue of other girls, however, continued. Bal Manch had requested Bal Adhikaar Manch to intervene in this regard. Members of the Bal Adhikaar Manch themselves were worried about the dissociation of several girls from education but were unable to find any solution that could overcome their worries regarding the security of the girls who were entering adolescence.

Phool Chand in this situation proposed the solution which he and his daughter were following. Entire Bal Adhikaar Manch found ray of hope. Girls can cycle down to the pre-secondary school in groups. Unlike Pooja, none of the other girls knew cycling but if cycles become available, learning was not going to be a problem.

Bal Adhikaar Manch, therefore, decided to arrange cycles for the girls who were about to take admission in class six. Pooja took up deep interest in training them although Bal Adhikaar Manch members gave their full support.

Today all of these girls have taken admission in the school at Chaubeypur. Poonam and Mamata have already learnt while others too are learning at fast pace. All of them seem to be on cloud nine. They have taken a flight towards the horizon of development and empowerment on their bicycles. And their parents are happy seeing their ascent.

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4. Organized efforts, Rightful Results

Today, in Daulatpur (Usara), scholarships were distributed in government school to students whose parents poor. But Vikas, Amit, Chandrabhan and Ankit, who study in the same school and were eligible, did not receive scholarship.

During recess time, all four of them had a small conversation on the complete scene. One of them, out of disappointment said, “We also deserve this scholarship, don’t understand why it has not been awarded to us?”

All of them sat down to have their lunch which is provided by the school itself under the Mid-day-meal scheme and is supplied by the NGOs. Its taste wasn’t good. They somehow pushed it down their throat and went back to their respective classes.

When the school-time was over all the four children went towards their habitation together:

“In all the discussions of our Bal Manch, it is said that all children are equal. Then why no student of our habitation has been issued scholarship.” Amit expressed his desperation. He added, “Even the quality of midday meal served to us is also not good.”

Chandrabhan thought for a while and replied, “We will canvass this matter of contention in Bal Manch meeting today. Didi (pryatnt team member) will also be present; we’ll ask her. She may have answers to all our queries.”
Bal Manch meeting began with all-consuming discussion on the issue.

After listening to all, Didi advised, “For a solution to this problem, you should take it to Bal Adhikaar Manch of this habitation. They can take the matter to the school administration. Scholarship and access to nutritive food is right of all the students who are eligible for it.”

It was then decided that Chandrabhan, Amit & Khushboo will raise the issue in Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting on the behalf of Bal Manch and will demand a solution.

Daulatpur (Usara) is a slum habitation in Varanasi district, which is a residence for 165 families with a tentative population of 1000 people. All these families are from West Bengal who have now migrated and settled down here. They are engaged in preparation of small items of brass & iron which are used in small statues, strings, etc. Since Varanasi is a tourist destination, their articles do earn them at least a square meal.

As per the decision, Chandrabhan, Amit & Khushboo represented Bal Manch in the Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting and raised the issue of scholarship and poor quality of mid-day meal. Along with the children, their parents were also present as they had already been made aware of the reality of mid-day-meal facility in their school and the discrimination in distribution of scholarship. When the meeting began, children were given opportunity of expressing the child rights violations that were being faced by them. Elders then discussed and decided to send Lakhpati, Jadaawati, Annapoorna and Anil Kumar to school to talk with the Headmaster and then share the discussion held with the Bal Adhikaar Manch.

All the four members of Bal Adhikaar Manch met with the Head Mistress of the government school and put up their contention. The Head Mistress told, “Application forms for the scholarship will be filled in the month of February. Parents of the applicant children should get their income certificates approved by the local ward members because the application forms along with the income certificates will be sent for the approval to the concerned department. Once departmental approval is granted, scholarships will be awarded to the eligible students.”

On the issue of quality of mid-day meal she clarified and requested, “We give feedback on the quality of food served to the NGO which has been assigned the
responsibility of centralized mid-day meal supply from time to time. Parents should also come to school at lunch time, see the food being served and give suggestions of improvement to the NGO.

All the four members returned back with a sense of hope. Annapoorna and Jadaawati took the responsibility of supervision of the management of mid-day-meal in school while Lakhpati and Anil Kumar took the responsibility of getting the income certificates approved from the ward member.

After the 2-3 visits to school and supervision of the mid-day-meal facility, things have improved a lot. Income certificates for the scholarship applications are also ready. Scholarships of six students (Vikas, Amit, Bhartiya, Chandrabhan, Khushboo and Ankit) have already started. Children, as well as, elders are happy. They have understood that collective efforts can ensure equal rights for them and their children. A ray of hope has illuminated their hearts.

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5. Anita Complains, Anita Responds

Rasoolgarh village has been witnessing a lot of discussions on children in recent times. Two of the members of Bal Adhikaar Manch, Asha and Anita, in particular, have become extremely caring and vocal about the children of the village. Their concern is, “Neither we look after and take care of the matters related to these children nor the facilities related to their health nor education are appropriate in this village. These children are not happy with the facilities of Anganwadi Center.”

Both of them (Asha and Anita) generate awareness among the women who are enceinte, lactating or are mothers of young children about the Anganwadi amenities which they can avail.

Today, Gayatri met with Asha unexpectedly on the way. She, with a sense of disappointment in her voice said, “We off and on talk about the Anganwadi Center facilities, our community needs them too, but Anganwadi Center never opens its doors to welcome us. And even if it opens up some day, then no activity is seen. Some collective efforts should be put in to look into it.”

Village Rasoolgarh is a village of block headquarters Chiraigaon in Varanasi district. It is located 5k.m. far from the block headquarters and 8 k.m. far from the district headquarter. There are around 600 families in this village which belong to schedule castes. Primary source of their earnings is daily labour.

Today, in Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting, apart from the members, other people from the community were also present. Asha raised the issue of Anganwadi Center in detail including, irregular opening and unavailability of supplementary nutrition for children, enceinte women, lactating mothers and children. She also talked about the ill-effects of this deprivation on the health of women & children.

Everybody’s views on what should be the next step were heeded. There was no second opinion: everybody felt, ‘Anganwadi Center belongs to this village. Anganwadi Worker is also a local resident. Initially 2-3 people should go and meet her and try to solve the problem through conversation only. We should ask her to open the center and distribute supplementary food to the eligible children and women on regular basis. We ourselves should take the responsibility of supervision of the functioning of the center.”
Meeting concluded on the final decision that Anita and Buddh Bhaskar will go and talk with the Anganwadi Worker, whose name is also Anita, and warn her about their next step of complaining to senior officers, if the problem is not solved at this level.

As per the discussion, all the three, met with the Anganwadi Worker. After a piece of conversation, she assured them that then onwards the center will be run properly.

Everybody was expecting an improvement and kept waiting. Whoever passed from the center reminded her. But no improvement happened even after a week’s time. She probably underestimated the warning because there was no precedence to such a complaint.

Once again Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting was called. Decision of lodging complaint with Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) at block level was collectively taken. An application for the same was prepared and was signed by all the members. Asha, Anita and Buddh Bhaskar, along with 2 other people were delegated the responsibility of going to Chiraigaon to meet with the officer.

The same was done. All of them reached CDPO’s office where they submitted the complaint on the behalf of their village and held detailed discussion with him. The CDPO assured that he will come to Rasoolgarh within a week and resolve the issue. Villagers returned with hope.

CDPO fulfilled his commitment. He came down to Rasoolgarh, took Anganwadi Worker together and talked with the community members. Angawadi Worker was asked to be regular while assurance on behalf of her was made by the CDPO. The officer added, “If any further complaint is received, then appropriate action will be taken against the worker.”

Next morning, everybody was looking at Anganwadi Center. It opened at the right time. Squeal of the toddlers and voices of the other happy children were reverberating in the whole street. Aroma of the freshly prepared wholesome food was all around in the air. Everybody was happy at the feat. They were commenting, “Anita complained, Anita responded.”

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6. Illumination Forever

Today, Sunil and Vanita had returned back to their village, Kotwa after a 3-day long residential training at Varanasi. Their friends were eagerly waiting to see them, as well as, to know what new they had learnt in Banaras as they had been attending a workshop that was organized for the selected members of Bal Manch.

“We enjoyed a lot,” Sunil told everyone with full excitement, “We sang, we played; there were children from other villages also; we shared about our forums and our experiences with each other. We also came to know about rights that children have and we declared that all children of Kotwa will work collectively to ensure those rights.”

“What are we required to do?” friends asked out of excitement.

“First of all, we’ll have to ensure that no girl or boy of Kotwa remains deprived of education. Simultaneously, we’ll take on other issues as well. It is our responsibility to see that how many boys and girls are not going to school. Tomorrow itself, we’ll get onto this work and prepare a list of such children.”

As indicated earlier, this story of Kotwa village, block Chiraigaon, district Varanasi. It is located at a distance of 5 k.m. from block headquarter and 12 k.m. from district headquarter. Majority of people residing in this village belong to a Schedule Caste. A few people belong to other communities also. Main source of income in this village is daily labour which is not enough for even a square meal.

Soon, Bal Manch members found out the children who were deprived of education in their village. Initially, 4 girls were listed out, all aged around 8 yrs. These four girls were - Neha and Nidhi both daughters of Shri Anil, Savita d/o Shri Harish Chandra and Poonam d/o Shri Ram Prasad. All four of them were helping their family members in either household work or daily labour.

Bal Manch decided to talk to the Bal Adhikaar Manch members regarding the issue of education of these four girls so that their parents could be talked to and these girls could be admitted to school as soon as possible.
Bal Adhikaar Manch responded to the issue promptly. Members spoke with all the four fathers. The fathers were of the opinion, “Girls stay at home and help out on household works. Otherwise also, what is the use of educating girls? In fact, we don’t even earn enough to a square meal. How will we afford their education?”

Bal Adhikaar Manch members told them about the importance of education and education as a right of children. They said, “Be it a girl or a boy, education is equally important and it is their right too. Keeping them deprived of their right is illegal. To ensure this right, government has made elementary education mandatory and free of cost. In fact, girls are provided with some special facilities also, which include free books, copies, uniform, scholarship and a bicycle to ride to school.”

The explanation mixed with peer group pressure proved effective. Coincidently, when village Pradhan, Shri Shiv Poojan, met with these three fathers, he also came up with the same opinion.

Ultimately, the three of them decided to send their girls to the nearby government school without any delay.

Today, all the four girls are regular attending their classes. They are happy. Community members are also supporting them and all of them wish for their better future. The torch that the training lit in the hearts of Sunil and Vanita has illuminated life of the four girls forever.

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7. The Real Rally

‘Poshan, Shiksha, Poora Pyaar, Hum Bachhon ka Hai Adhikaar’
(Nutrition, Education and Affection are Rights of all Children)

A lot of similar slogans were being shouted in the rally that was being organized by children of Rasoolgarh village. All the children, participating in the rally, were carrying placards which read slogan related to the need and importance of education, right to education and nutrition & health. Slogans against child labour were also penned. Children from a local school and some other children from village were also participating. School teachers and some community members were also participating in the rally.

From whichever street the rally marched, people were looking at it with inquisitorial eyes and full enthusiasm. They were asking each other, “Why has this rally been organized? Today, it is neither 15th of August nor 26th of January.”

As rally came closer to them, they could make out the objective of the rally. The activity was interesting and inspiring for them. Many of them joined it to see how it is going to be concluded.

As indicated earlier, this rally was organized in Rasoolgarh Village which is located in Chiraigaon block, Varanasi; this village is located at a distance of 5 k.m. from block headquarter and 8 k.m. from district headquarter. All 600 people who are residing in this village belong to schedule caste and work as daily wage labourers to earn their bread and butter.

Both Bal Manch and Bal Adhikaar Manch are functional in the village. The Bal Adhikaar Manch was feeling that school education in the village is not going on properly. Many children enroll themselves in the government school at the beginning of the session but stop going after sometime. Why was this was happening was, therefore, analyzed and it was found that more than children, it was the school and the guardians who were responsible for the irregularity. The forum, therefore, decided to talk with both the stakeholders.

The beginning was made from school itself. Manch members started visiting the school and talking with the teachers and helping them on regular basis. Issues like
use of joyful means in teaching-learning, enabling fearless atmosphere in the school, overall (physical, mental and emotional) development of each and every child, etc. were discussed. School authorities also took the involvement of the community in positive manner.

On the other hand, the members of Bal Adhikaar Manch contacted community members also on regular basis. Children who were not going to school or were irregular were identified and parental and community related barriers in this regard were analyzed. It was found that parents of such children are not sensitive towards their education and are involving them in child labour. Their sensitization was, therefore, considered necessary and measures to curb this situation were worked out. Present rally was one of such measures. School teachers Ms. Arti Gautam and Ms. Munni Devi Kushwaha had also played a vital and positive role in the organization of this rally.

The rally was concluded in the school only. A lot of community members had joined it and the entire campus was full. Everybody was curious to know what is going to happen now. After everybody settled down, Bal Adhikaar Manch members, together with the school authorities, appealed community members to enroll children who are still out-of-school and regularize those who are irregular for the sake of their future, as well as, considering it as their right. Parents gave their assent in response. Further, it was collectively decided that community members and school authorities will meet with each other on regular basis and cooperate mutually so as to ascertain rights of children.

The event proved to be highly effective. Parents of all children became sensitive towards education of children. They started sending their children to school in neat and clean and timely manner regularly. At least 24 of them, who were previously irregular, have become regular in this manner. Weekly meeting of children in school, which has been mandated under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, has also been started so that children are able to express themselves freely in front of teachers. They are happy with sensitiveness generated in this manner. Community members and teachers are also happy with the improvements and are feeling that they have been able to do justice with their children. They have learnt that the real rally will not be over unless every child is able to achieve his or her rights.
8. Tiffin not required!

It was a pleasant Sunday evening in Bhamiyar. Clock showed 4.00 pm. The members of Bal were together in open to play games of their liking. Small groups had been formed accordingly. Other children of the village had also joined. Entire environment had become extremely vociferous and full of joy.

Amidst all this joy, a few children noticed their friends Sandeep Kumar, Tilak and Jiyalal returning to the village in exhausted and weary manner. Tilak was perchance carrying a pouch of gutkha in his hand. The playing children called them. They stopped and joined but when some of these children invited them to play, they sickly refused, "No friends, we are already very tired. We don't really feel like playing. Just want to get back to home, have something to eat and doze off"

Bhamiyar is a village in Cholapur block of Varanasi district. It is situated at a distance of 7 k.m. from block headquarter and 12 k.m. from district headquarter. Majority of its population belongs to Bairwa community which is a Scheduled Caste, while a fraction belongs to some other communities also. Daily labour is the main source of income of the villagers. They usually work in brick kilns, as farms, masonry works etc. Seasonally, some people even migrate to Gujarat and Maharashtra for work.

Children have also been engaged as child labour by many of these families to support livelihood of the family. Sandeep, Tilak and Jiyalal are among them. They are enrolled in grades 5 & 6 in the local government school in which other children of the village are also studying. But they hardly go to school; instead they are working in a nearby brick kiln.

Bal Manch members were not feeling happy about engagement of their friends as child labourers. They discussed mutually and decided to take some step to disburden them from working in brick kiln and get them back to school. They finally decided raise the issue in front of Bal Adhikaar Manch.

Bal Adhikaar Manch representatives, after discussion, went to school to enquire about the children. They found that all the three child labourers were absent from school; teachers too were unaware of the reason of their absence. Finally, it was
decided that guardians of the three boys will be called in the Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting and the issue will be discussed with them.

Sant Lal, Panna Lal, and Babbar, the guardians of the three boys tried to ignore the issue by putting forward excuse of their poor economic condition and also said, “We want our children to study but they never pay attention to what we say.”

To make them understand, Bal Adhikaar Manch members discussed about the ill-effects of child labour on the life of a child. They also informed the illiterate parents about the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act under which people who push their children towards labour are punishable. They suggested, “You should immediately free your children from working in brick kiln and start sending them to school. You may discuss about it at your homes, talk to your children and, if required, you can talk to the brick kiln owners too. If any kind of help in required, we are there to support you, just let us know.” They added, “After 4 days, a Parents’ Teachers’ Meeting will be organized. By then, you can communicate your decision to us.”

Parents’ Teachers’ Meeting started on the set time. All parents and teachers participated. Santlal, Pannalal and Babbar were specially invited. Another community member, Raj Nath, whose son Sooraj was also found working as child labourer in brick kiln later, was also invited in this manner. After all other discussion the four of them were asked to declare their decision. The four, with a sense of realization, said, “It was definitely wrong on our part that we were sending our children for labour. We were spoiling their future. But now no more labour for them. From tomorrow itself, our children will go to school instead of brick kiln.”

Everybody welcomed the decision of the four families with a big hand. Their words were written down on piece of paper which was signed by them to strengthen their commitment. Teachers, community people and children were happy. After all it was the beginning of child friendly environment in Bhamiyar village.

Now the four children are not required to carry their tiffin with them because midday meal is available within school itself. They are now enjoying games along with studying in a playful environment.

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9. Water leads the Way

Last week 3-4 children from different families suffered from disgorge. Some suffered dysentery too. After treatment with home-based remedies, they have regained their health. But Vidya couldn’t. She is suffering from diarrhea from last two days and has caught fever as well. She was finally taken to the doctor.

The doctor examined Vidya carefully and concluded that her illness because of consumption of contaminated water. He asked, “Is there anybody else in the house who is also suffering from similar problem?”

“No!” Vidya’s mother replied.

The doctor felt that if water, which is being used at home, is infected, then other family members should also have developed symptom. But here, only Vidya was sick, so this possibility gets ruled out.

“What kind of water do you drink?” The doctor then turned to Vidya for further investigation.

“Since last week, our teacher has stopped sending us to our home to drink water. So we have no option except drinking water from school’s water tank, which is most of the time hot and sometime stinky as well. 3-4 other students have also suffered from the same problems.”

Vidya’s response was good enough for a non-medico as well to make out the correct root cause of the illness. The doctor suggested that she should carry her own water bottle to school so that drinking water from school’s water tank is not required. The girl and her mother returned after collecting the prescribed medicines.

Vidya’s mother was shocked when she came to know about the misery that the children were facing in their school. Upon reaching home, she thought, “This is not a proper solution to this problem. After all, how many parents will send water bottles along with their children and for how long?”

Finally, Vidya’s mother raised the issue of unavailability of potable water in school, in Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting where she was a regular member. She emphasized,
“During last few days, Vidya and many other children of this village have fallen ill. We should immediately take some steps to crackdown the problem.”

Upon discussion, it was then decided that Hirawati, Shakuntala, Prema, Phool Chand and Mahendra will visit the school on the next day itself and will talk over the issue with school administration. They also decided to take up the matter of the new hand pump that was due to be fixed since long and enquire what is its status, by when it will be installed and what will be arrangement of potable water till then?

During discussion, the Head Master told, “Long back a hand pump was sanctioned, but because of administrative negligence, it has not yet been fixed. We have given an application to the concerned department a lot many times. We have raised this issue in several administrative meetings as well. Even Pradhan ji has also been informed but he also came up with his incapability of taking any action.”

“Bal Adhikaar Manch will take the issue forward on behalf of the community and children. Nobody knows how much time it is going to take. Until then, get the water tank thoroughly cleaned up and get it filled with fresh and potable water on daily basis. And if there is any problem, please let us know.”
Bal Adhikaar Manch representatives offered the solution which was accepted to the Head Master. They returned and met with the other villagers to tell them about the discussions and the decision.

The Head Master also felt good when he saw the concern of community members for school. Cleaning up and daily refilling of water tank began immediately. To bring in a proper and permanent solution, an application was written in the name of the Block Development Officer (BDO), Cholapur, in which details of the problems being faced by children were highlighted. The application was signed by maximum community members and a photocopy of the same was retained for reference and use in future. A five-member delegation met with the BDO and handed over the application to him after having a dialogue. They returned upon receiving assurance of time bound disposal of problem.

This is the story of village Dwimitva which is in Cholapur block of Varanasi district. It is located at a distance of 8 k.m. from the block head quarter and 30 k.m. from the district head quarter. With a total of 30 families residing in this village its population is 175, majority of which belong to Harijan community. Main source of income of people of this village is labour.

Assurance was not fulfilled. 15 days later, Bal Adhikaar Manch members again went to remind the BDO, again an assurance was given, and again nothing happened. This happened several times but the members were determined. After 3 months of rigorous exercise, the day came when the people of Dwimitva village heard the sound of boring machine. Till the time it was all dug and ample amount of water came out, people kept standing there only. After a day’s gap, the hand pump was finally fixed. Young children swung around the hand pump and welcomed the arrival of fresh drinking water.

The hand pump brought relief not only to children from water-borne diseases but also to teachers themselves because they too had no option except using the contaminated water. After all, they too were dependent upon the same tank for their water requirement. As such, the effort of the Bal Adhikaar Manch has led the way of developing relationship of cooperation between community and school.

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10. Torch of Enlightenment

Since the establishment of Bal Adhikaar Manch and Bal Manch in the village and the return of the members of both the forums from the training workshop, atmosphere of their Rauna Khurd seems to have changed. In fact the topics of discussion of children have also changed. Apart from just playing and enjoying, they have started talking about children who do not go to school and are engaged somewhere as child labourers. They now say, “So and so child, instead of studying works in brick kiln. We should get him back to school and free him from working as a child labourer”. They are also being seen as commenting on functioning of school like mid –day meal, corporal punishment by teachers, etc.

The status of members of Bal Adhikaar Manch is also same. Instead of howling for the failures on work front, lack of development and negligence from the Pradhan or blaming on poverty and ill-fate, they have started talking about development, education for children, their health, and improvement in quality of services being provided in school and Anganwadi Center.

Rauna Khurd comes under Cholapur block of Varanasi district of Uttar Pradesh and is situated about 5 k.m. far from the block head quarters and 15 k.m. far from the district headquarters. Around 750 people are residing in this village and they belong to Chamaar (a Scheduled Caste) community. Main source of their occupation is labour, which includes working in brick kiln, masonry or on any other type of labour.
Unfortunately, along with adults, some of children also work in brick kilns. The active Bal Manch members trailed them out and made a list. These children were Brijesh, Rajesh Kumar, Rambali, Roshan, Vijay and Rajesh. The Bal Manch decided to hand over the list to the local Bal Adhikaar Manch so that they could further speak with the parents of these children in order to connect them to studies and disburden them from working in brick kiln.

The list was handed to two very active members of Bal Adhikaar Manch, Manoj Kumar and Chhote lal, and request was made, "These children have to be mainstreamed in government schools. Please have a word with the parents of these children while we will talk with the children themselves."

Bal Adhikaar Manch knew the organized manner of working. Some of the members took the responsibility to speak with their parents while others decided to contact the local government school. This was to be followed by a joint meeting of teachers and community members covering issue of irregularity of other children in the school along with the prime issue of child labour.

All members performed their duties well. Finally, the joint meeting was organized on 8th of March, 2011 at 4:30 pm in front of the house of Chhote Lal (one of the community members). The Head Master Shri Basant Kumar Yadav & Teacher Shri Amarnath also accepted the invitation to attend this meeting. Children also played important role by informing each & every house about the meeting and ensured that at least one member from each family reached the venue.

Meeting began at 4:30 pm sharp; both the teachers also reached the meeting place on time and the other residents of village were also present. After welcoming all, Chhote lal ji said, “Today we are here to discuss the issues related with children who are not going to school and those who are going to school but are irregular. We shall also discuss how good quality school education can be ensured in fearless environment. Please put forward your suggestions and complaints if any.”

Teachers were also thankful to the community members because this was the first time when community members had come forward to talk on the issue concerning better quality of education. They assured that the school will cooperate with the community in the entire process.
All the points in the agenda of the meeting were discussed one-by-one. After a while, Chhote lal ji brought up the names of the 6 children who were working in brick kiln and said, “Keeping these children deprived from education is violation of their rights. We request their parents to look into matter seriously and let their children study.”

For a few minutes, it was all silent. Chhotelal and other Bal Adhikaar Manch members were looking at the community people. Breaking the silence, Jalandhar stood up and said, “I am the one who is at fault. My boy works in a brick kiln. But now I declare in front of you all that, from tomorrow onwards, he will also go to school to study. No more working in brick kiln”.

Everybody praised Jalandhar’s decision by applauding. After a wonderful beginning by him, Geeta Devi, Kismat Devi, Prabhavati Devi, Babulal and Chanra Devi, promised the same, one-by-one. A commitment letter was prepared which read the same. It was first signed by the parents of those 6 children. Then the parents of other children also signed. The enthusiasm that was getting reflected in this process was proving that the torch of enlightenment has started illuminating every heart.

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11. The ‘Right’ ‘Act’

Mukesh was throwing tantrums while going to school. Looking at his behavior, his father asked, “My lad, why don’t you want to go to school, today?

“I have to deposit Rs. 10 as examination fees but Mummy is not giving me any money”, Mukesh replied.

“But son, as far as we know, no such fee is supposed to be paid in government school. Under the Right to Education Act, elementary level education in government schools is absolutely free.”

Mukesh’s father knew about the recently enacted Right to Free and Compulsory Elementary Education Act. But the son was adamant. Perhaps, he was being persuaded by the school teachers, because of which he was fearful too. Father could read the mix of the feelings on son’s face and decided not to push him further. He gave him the money and simultaneously decided to discuss the matter in the Bal Adhikaar Manch.

School fee was being charged in the Upper Primary School of Dwimitva. Dwimitva is a village located in Cholapur block of Varanasi district. Its population of 700 and includes different communities like Brahmin, Yadav and Harijan. The main source of occupation of the inhabitants is daily wage labour.

Many parents, just like Mukesh’s father, had given money to their children to pay school examination fees. Children who had not deposited the fee were being persuaded by the teachers. Under such conditions the burden was ultimately getting transferred to their parents.

The issue was discussed in the subsequent Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting and collective decision to talk with the school authorities was taken. As per the decision, 4 members visited the school where they got chance of interacting with one of the teachers.

“We have received order of charging the fee from the Block Resource Center,” the teacher gave a blunt response.
“Okay! Then please give us the copy of the order. We will talk with the Basic Education Officer on the basis of the order.”

The unexpected intelligent request of the Bal Adhikaar Manch members pushed the teacher and the Principal, who had joined the discussion in the meantime, on back foot. The Principal artfully asked the representatives to take fee charged from their children back. For other children and parents, he said, “It’s not your matter of concern. It is between us and them. Why do you get involved in it?”

Bal Adhikaar Manch members knew that this was not fair. They wanted that fee charged from each and every child should be returned. But argument at the time of examination didn’t appear appropriate to them. They decided to let the examinations be over smoothly and raise the issue thereafter.

After the examination, the BAM members went to school again. The Principal, this time, returned all the fee money back without uttering a single word. In fact, he apologized for the mistake which he had committed in the so called ‘absence of awareness’ and requested BAM members to ‘close the issue then and there itself’. Perhaps he had understood the strength of Bal Adhikaar Manch by that time.

The Bal Adhikaar Manch itself then realized the strength that they gain when they are organized. They also realized what strength a right gains when it is supported by suitable law.
12. The True Barrier!

Asha and Anita are good friends. They are neighbours too. Asha is mother of an about 6-7 months old girl while Anita is 3-4 months pregnant.

Since last few months, there is an environment in favour of child rights protection in their village. To ensure the child rights, a forum for children below 18 yrs of age, namely Bal Manch, has been constituted. Members of this forum take on the issues related to their ownself, i.e. those related with children. Studies, games, issues related to school, etc., are the hot topics of discussions among these children.

Similarly, there is a forum of adults, called Bal Adhikaar Manch, where they talk about ensuring child rights. They say, “A child is the most important responsibility of a society, whether it is a foetus, an infant, a school going child or an adolescent.”

Asha and Anita are the members of the same Bal Adhikaar Manch. After participating in different activities of this forum, they have become aware that pregnant and lactating women should get proper nutrition. They have learnt that apart from their homes, such women are entitled to get supplementary nutrition from Anganwadi center as well.

Asha and Anita are residents of village Kataari which is located in Cholapur block of Varanasi district in Uttar Pradesh. Population of this village is about 20,000. This includes different communities like Kshatriya, Maurya, Kannojiya, Vishwakarma, Muslim and Harijan. Villagers earn their livelihood through a variety of occupations but the one which is most prevalent, particularly among Harijans, is daily labour. Asha and Anita also belong to two of such Harijan families.

One day, a group of 5 women of this village reached local Anganwadi centre for a supplementary nutrition. This group of the 5 included Asha, Anita and Munni Devi. When the Anganwadi worker saw Harijan women coming to the center for the first time, she became apprehensive. Questions like, “Why are they coming here, what do they want, what will they talk about?” were perhaps floating in her mind.

Anganwadi worker’s mentality was caste biased. Therefore, when these women approached her, she talked rudely.
“Tell me, why you have come here?”

“Pregnant and lactating women of the habitation are entitled to receive supplementary nutrition from Anganwadi Center. We have come here to claim the same. Two of such women, Asha & Anita, are already with us.”

“No supplementary nutrition is provided here.”

“You should provide it because government supplies it to your center for distribution to such women. If you don’t follow, we will talk about it with senior officers of your department at block and district level.”

“Go, do whatever you want to and talk with whoever you want to, I don’t care.”

“No, we will not only talk; if such action is required, we will go to the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) with a detailed written complaint so that if no action is taken still, we will be having documentary evidence to support further action.”

The Anganwadi worker was not expecting such a systematic response from almost illiterate women. It was absolutely unprecedented for her. She got alarmed. She felt that, perhaps, days of running Anganwadi center as per her irregular, corrupt and biased will are over. She checked and decided to start distribution of the supplementary nutrition to the women immediately.

Both Asha and Anita got their supplementary nutrition. Message to other eligible women of the habitation to come to the center and collect their entitlement was also communicated by the worker through the five representatives. When the other women approached, the Anganwadi worker treated them in a much better manner.

All of the women were surprised to see that such a small doable action at their end could bring the change in their village life. They realized that mindset of Anganwadi worker was responsible for their deprivation only partially. It was their own mindset which was the true barrier. Now since they realized this, they will ensure that this barrier does not come in the way of ensuring theirs and their children’s lives.

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13. The Real Gambler!

Today, Luvkush ji, a Community Organizer, had come to the village when the school was about to close. He, therefore, came to school to meet Bal Manch children directly instead of going to meet community directly which he usually does at first. Children had planned to get together to play today.

Soon the school bell rang and children rushed out with joy. When children saw Luvkush ji coming towards them, their joy doubled and all of them surrounded him.

“Today we are going to play Kabaddi”, one of them said with full excitement.

“That’s wonderful, let me also join you”, Luvkush ji expression of interest increased the excitement of the children further.

“What all other games do you play? I mean, all the children, whether they are associated with Bal Manch or school or not”.

Children listed out many types of local and general games aloud. But amidst all the noise Luvkush ji could clearly hear subtly spoken but alarming words of a shy child who gave an innocent smile then. The words were, “some children play with cards as well.”

This is the case of village Latauri. Village Latauri falls in Cholapur block of Varanasi. It is located a distance of 11 k.m. from the block headquarters and 13 k.m. from district headquarters. Majority of its population depends upon agriculture and daily wage labour.

“How do you play this game”, Luvkush ji further asked.

“We don’t know much about it but it is played in a group of four and all of them put money on stake. The money which is declared on stake by all the four players is taken away by the one who wins. Losers get disappointed.”

“This is gambling. It is a very bad habit. It ruins the life of the player as well as his family. Children should never indulge in it. Instead, they should focus on studies and
other constructive games,” Luvkush ji now started explaining the ills of gambling.

“Who all play this game?” Luvkush ji asked further.

“Sandeep, Deepu, Chandan, Mithun, Abhishek, Mangla, Mukesh and Ramakant are the ones whom we know; there are some others also,” Children didn’t take time in recalling the names.

“Some of them gamble with marbles also” Geeta added.

“Where do they get money from?” Luvkush ji further inquired.

“They make some or the other excuses and take money from their parents.”

Ill habits that were prevailed among the children were unfolding. Luvkush ji took a break at the moment while asking the children to continue their game. Sitting at a distance he started thinking about the game that was itself playing with life of the children.

After a while, when children started feeling tired, they stopped playing and came to Luvkush ji. Together they went to their regular meeting spot, a mat was placed and Bal Manch meeting was started. Gambling of children became the issue of focus of the meeting. How the game was ruining children was discussed in detail. Children told that children addicted to it lie with their parents to get money for playing. If they are unable to get money in this manner they start stealing it. Many times they indulge in quarreling and fighting for money.

“What is your opinion now?” Luvkush ji asked when the discussion on adverse effects was appearing to be over.

“This ill should be stopped,” Children called in one voice.
“What should we do and how?”

“We should talk to these children and their parents”, Sonu came out with a suggestion.

“First of all, we should take this matter to Bal Adhikaar Manch and ask the members to talk with the parents of such children because we can have a dialogue only with these children.” Vishwesh added.

When the matter reached Bal Adhikaar Manch member, they decided to organize a general meeting of the village after having a word with all the members. The children, who were addicted to gambling, and their parents were called in particular.

Kailash Ram, Hans Raj Sudarshan, Babulal, Bachau and Suvaram (parents of the concerned children) expressed their helplessness saying, ”We go out for work in the morning itself; children do whatever they want thereafter”.

The members of the Bal Adhikaar Manch asked other members of the family and well as neighbourhood to keep watch while advising parents themselves to be cautious. They then turned towards the concerned children who humbly admitted their mistake (Bal Manch members had already spoken with them) and promised of not repeating any such habit in future. Bal Manch as well as Bal Adhikaar Manch assured their support to them in this regard. The meeting concluded with a call of abandoning gambling even by adults in the village which draws children to this ill-practice.

Latauri village is now free of gambling. Each and every child has got rid of it. They have even made a corpus of their own in which each child deposits Rs. 2 every month. They use this money to purchase their sports utilities. This has amazed their parents also. But they simultaneously remain cautious to check that the money is not misused. Now everybody has understood that when a person starts gambling, it is not he but the game itself who is the real gambler and this gambler plays with the life of that person and his family members with children being the worst hit.

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14. Key to Prosperity

Heera Rajbhar, Santosh and Bachau Harijan had arrived a bit early to participate in Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting. Hansraj, an active member of the Manch had returned after attending a workshop. He was supposed to share the information and learning that he had gained there. As there was some time left for meeting to begin, they got involved in mutual conversations. Upbringing of their children, their education, marriages, etc., were the topics that they were talking about.

Heera Rajbhar, who belonged to a below poverty line (BPL) family, was talking about his financial problems. He was bothered about his daughter’s grooming, her education and marriage. Santosh and Bachau Harijan were also from BPL families. Their problems were also more or less same.

Before Hansraj could say anything, other people had also started gathering. He therefore requested to let others also come. His comment, “I’ll tell something that will bring smile on your faces and other will also be benefited”, generated curiosity in everybody’s mind.

This meeting was going on in one of the habitations of Chiraigaon block headquarters of Varanasi district. The habitation in which the project was being implemented is situated at a distance of 3 k.m. from block headquarters and is 10 k.m. far from the district headquarters. It is residence of around 45 families and 350 human population and agriculture and daily wage labour are the prime occupations here.

Meeting began. After addressing everybody, Hansraj began saying, “We have constituted this forum to create a better understanding on issues related to children and ensure their rights. Girls are also the important members of our families. But considering that she will go to another family after marriage, we treat her as liability and adopt discriminatory attitude against her. This results in her poor upbringing and education. The expenses of her marriage, especially, bother us the most”.

Heera Rajbhar, Santosh and Bachau were listening to Hansraj very attentively. They could relate his words with their own problems. For well off families, it may not be so, but for a poor family, daughter’s marriage is one of the most bothersome issues.
Hansraj continued, “To support BPL families in this situation so as to check discrimination against girls, State Government has come up with Mahamaya Balika Samriddhi Scheme. Under this scheme State Governments deposits Rs 20,000 in the fixed deposit account of the girl who is under 2 years of age. After 18 years, the girl gets Rs 1,20,000 from the bank. For this you need submit an application to the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) with a copy of the girl’s birth certificate, BPL list and BPL card and an affidavit. Help of local Anganwadi worker and ASHA can be taken in obtaining the application form to its completion and submission to the CDPO”.

The information shared by Hansraj proved to be a ray of hope for all the poor eligible villagers. Heera Rajbhar, Santosh and Bachau in particular became very happy. Without any delay, they sought application and filled it up. Within 2 weeks, all the documents were readied and application was sent to the CDPO through the local Anganwadi worker.

Sometime later, the three parents received a postal communication from the local bank. When they opened the envelope and saw, they felt as if the envelop of their fortune has been opened. The envelope was carrying the receipt of the fixed deposit. They were almost jumping with joy and relief. After all, they now had the key to prosperity. They immediately pledged that they will take care of their daughters in every possible manner and will not discriminate between girls and boys anytime.

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15. Smartness Punctured!

“No problem can remain unsolved if efforts are made in organized manner. And no right remains inaccessible if efforts are made in organized manner.”

These lines were again and again reverberating in the minds of Parvati Devi and Meena Devi. When the too met at the hand pump, they started discussing, “If pregnant and lactating women of our village are not receiving supplementary nutrition and the other facilities from Anganwadi Center; such women should collectively go to the center and talk with the Anganwadi Worker. The same was told during the general meeting of the village and yesterday’s Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting. We must visit the Anganwadi Kendra and talk to the worker. May be we are deprived of these facilities because we don’t go there and demand”.

“There is also a possibility that Anganwadi worker denies us the facilities that we are eligible for. In that case we will have to talk at higher level.”

Both of them seemed to be aware about their rights. They decided to take the eligible women to Anganwadi Kendra on Saturday.

These awakened women are from Cholapur village which is located in the block of same name in Varanasi district. Around 36 families are residing here. Population is approximately 610. Majority of it belongs to Harijan community. Daily wage labour is the main source of income of its residents.

Parvati and Meena discussed the issue with the other women of the village and then all of them went to the Anganwadi center on Saturday. When they reached there, the Anganwadi worker became cautious. She sharply asked, “What do you want?”

“All these women are either pregnant or lactating women and have come here to know more about the supplementary nutrition.”
nutrition and other services provided in the Anganwadi center and take their due”, Parvati replied.

“Are you some officer or what that you have come for inspection? If you want something to eat, take some sattu and leave.” She said in an affront manner.

Her response was unacceptable to Meena Devi. She said, “We are not begging. Supplementary nutrition is our right.”

“Supplementary nutrition is not available today, come next week” the worker shirked.

The group of women came back. Next week they again went to the center. But this time they were again given a very rude response, “This center does not receive any supplementary nutrition for your people.”

“Okay, no matters, but give it to us in writing”.

Women had come prepared for every kind of response. Worker understood that no excuse will work now. False excuses cannot be given in written. The only option with her now was to start distributing the nutrition. But her mentality still remained the same. It seemed as if she was distributing the sacrament. Parvati Devi again intervened, “Behan ji, we are supposed to be distributed 960 gm of it. You should be aware about the fact that pregnant and lactating women are entitled of receiving 960 grams of supplementary nutrition while children entitled to get 480 grams of it. If you did not know this earlier then now make it a point and always remember to distribute the same quantity.”

Anganwadi worker was speechless. Collective, well informed and well organized action of these women forced her to fulfill her responsibility. Since then, Anganwadi Center of Cholapur village is running smoothly and consistently. Pregnant and lactating women, adolescent girls as well as other children of all the habitations are getting benefit of it. Women keep eye on its functioning and provide support to the worker as well whenever needed. The worker does not try to be ‘smarter’ then them. She cannot dare to be so now. Proper collective action of village women has punctured her cunning smartness.

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16. Up side down, down side Up!

“There is neither Anganwadi center nor any of its facilities in our village; we have heard that there is a common Anganwadi center in our village and our neighbouring village and it runs in the government school located there.”

This statement was made by the villagers, at the time when the Community Organizer told that till the age of 18 parents are responsible to protect the rights of children, and the issue of Anganwadi facility was discussed in the same context. The Community Organizer discussed importance of the facility for children including adolescent girls and pregnant and lactating women. Upon demand of the villagers to start the center in their own village she suggested, “It is good to have a Anganwadi center in the village, but till it opens, its our right to have the facilities from the center which is responsible.”

The above discussion was made in the meeting of Bal Adhikaar Manch of Moreri village. Moreri village falls under the development block of Cholapur in Varanasi district in Uttar Pradesh. It is 40 km far from the development block and district headquarters. This village consists of people from all communities. There are 40 Harijan families whose population is of about 400 and the major occupation is agriculture and wage labour.

After the discussion, 8 deserving women went to the Anganwadi center and said “We have come from Moreri to have our supplementary nutrition.”

Anganwadi Worker, Rajkumari, couldn’t answer anything and made the excuse that the stock had finished and it would be distributed next week when it comes. Such statement was made, perhaps, because earlier, none of the women from Moreri used to come and if they are avoided once they wouldn’t come again because of distance. But when the women came back on next Saturday, the worker was surprised. She again avoided them saying that the supplementary nutrition is not distributed at home. Third time, the Anganwadi worker could not resist herself and shouted, “Why do you people create problem? How can we give you the supplementary nutrition? We need to pay for getting the supplementary nutrition, and the money for this payment comes from (sale of) this supplementary nutrition only.”
Women were puzzled. They came back but discussed, “How money is required for bringing the nutrition?” This became an issue, and it was decided that if they are refused on next Saturday also, they will seek the excuse in written form.

Again for the fourth time women were at the center to take the supplement and told “Give us the supplements or give us in writing what you need to pay in office and why and how our entitlement is used for making this payment.”

The Anganwadi Worker had understood that the women had become aware. She had probably discussed with her senior official as well. She started distributing the supplementary nutrition to the women. Still she was not honest. The quantity which she distributed was less than that stipulated under the scheme. While returning the women discussed, “Quantity of nutrition is appearing to be less. Next week we will take the nutrition only after weighing. We know that every week pregnant and lactating women should be given 960 grams of supplementary nutrition while children should be given 480 grams of it.”

Next week, the women insisted on weighing of the nutrition before distribution. The worker did not want to do so but the women stood firm. When weighed, the quantity was found to be less. The Anganwadi worker’s irregularity was exposed. Now she had no option but to distribute full amount. The women took the amount and warned the worker not to repeat the irregularities in future. Else, they will complain about it to senior officials and seek her removal if required. They simultaneously added that for regular working they will extend all the support required from them.

Since then, the Anganwadi Center has become regular. All the services are being delivered in proper manner. People of Moreri have, in the meantime, applied for a separate center in their own village with due list of entitled children and women. As the irregularities of the department were coming down, their confidence was going up. It is expected that there demand will be fulfilled soon.

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17. No scheme is effective unless…

Today when Laxmina Devi and Prabhawati crossed the local school while going to the other village for some work, they saw that while older children were sitting in their respective classes, younger children were sitting in verandah of a nearby room and were eating something. 5-6 women were also sitting there.

“Look, this is an Anganwadi Center”, Prabhawati told Laxmina, “Here free supplementary nutrition is distributed to children, pregnant women as well as lactating mothers. Pre-primary education is also provided here so that children get accustomed to school environment by the time they get old enough to take admission in primary school.”

“But no children of our habitation are taking benefit of this facility. Why?” Laxmina questioned.

“How can they access this facility? It is not possible for them to cover this long distance of Anganwadi centre from our village”, Prabhawati explained.

“But there should be an Anganwadi centre in our habitation also. After all, our habitation also has sufficient number of children.” Prabhawati said with a pinch of awareness in her voice.

“Alright, we will discuss this topic in Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting” Prabhawati wound up the matter because they had reached their destination.

Laxmina and Prabhavati are from Jalhupur village. Jalhupur comes under Block Chiraigaon of Varanasi district. Distance of this village from block headquarters is 8 km, while from district headquarters; it is located at a distance of 12 km. The village has a separate habitation for scheduled caste families which are around 100 in number. The population of the habitation is about 600. The population depends upon daily labour and agriculture for income.

In Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting, the Prabhawati and Laxmina raised the issue of non-accessibility of Anganwadi Center saying, “Children of our village are deprived from the facility of Angawadi centre which is their right. The issue had emerged during the micro level planning also but nothing has been done yet”. 
Everybody was in agreement with the concern and the viewpoint of the two women. A detailed discussion was held and at the end of it, it was decided that Chandrashekhar and Ashok Puri would prepare list of children of the habitation who are eligible for services of Anganwadi centre so that it may be submitted to the District officer, Women and Child Development Department, Varanasi, through Child Development Project Officer (CDPO), Chiraigaon, along with the application of opening a center in their own habitation.

In the next meeting of the Manch, Ashok and Chandrashekhar presented the list. There were names of around 60 children who were in the 0 to 6 years age group and were deprived of Anganwadi services. An application was written and signed by all the members. A few photocopies of the application were also sought.

Ashok Kumar, Ram Dular, Laxmina, Prabhavati and Chandreshekhar, took the application and the list and met with the CDPO. They explained him the problem in detail and handed the application and the supporting list to him. The officer after listening to the details gave assurance of opening up the center in the habitation soon. A receipt of the application was also sought from him for future reference. Later on, whichever member used to get to Chiraigaon, used to visit CDPO's office and remind him about the application.

Year 2011 brought the much awaited good news. Anganwadi Center was opened and Anganwadi Worker and Sahaayika were appointed. In March, CDPO himself paid visit to the center and ascertained all the arrangements. The center was operating satisfactorily and residents of the village were expressing their gratitude towards him. CDPO felt happy and appreciated awareness and efforts of the villagers.

A comment of Ram Dular, one of the residents, was memorable on the occasion. He said, “We made a plan but unless it was implemented it did not yield anything. The same is true with government. None of its scheme can prove to be effective unless its implementation is ensured. Ensuring implementation is as important as preparing a plan.”

Everybody could understand what Ram Dular meant. The officer too got the point.

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Sometime ago, whenever Shakuntala and Urmila used to go from their habitation to the village, they used to get shocked upon seeing the pathetic condition of the Anganwadi Center. Hardly 2-4 children used to appear sitting in a room, with no activities at all. Angawadi worker and helper were always busy in chit-chat, away from any concern about the children. And many a times it used to remain closed. Both of the women used to discuss, “Why has this Anganwadi center been opened here, when there are no children to access its services? Either there is dearth of eligible children in the locality or their parents don’t want to send the children to the center considering the service to be unimportant or demeaning for them. And if there is an Anganwadi centre somewhere then there are no children to avail its facilities or if children are there, then their parents do not consider the facilities unimportant or demeaning for them.”

The direction of discussion however changed when their awareness on child rights grew. They started understanding importance of nutrition, health, care, education and what it means when these are said to be child rights. A Bal Adhikaar Manch has been constituted in the village where issues related with children are discussed on priority.

Shakuntala and Urmila belong to a habitation of schedule caste population of Khaalispur village. The habitation is located on the outskirts of the village which falls in the Chiraigaon block, Varanasi district and is located at a dist of 10 k.m. from block headquarter as well as district headquarter. The population of the habitation is 800 and daily wage labour is the prime source of livelihood for the inhabitants.

“Why can’t the Anganwadi Center which is being run in Khaalispur be shifted to our habitation?” Shakuntala asked when Bal Adhikaar Manch meeting was going on, today. She urged, “Children from the Khaalispur (i.e., main village) rarely go to Anganwadi. They are generally from better off families. Majority of eligible children, on the other hand, are from our habitation and we are willing to send them but because of distance, we can’t do so.”

“We know that the Anganwadi center in Khaalispur is running just for name sake,”
Vinod Kumar, another Bal Adhikaar Manch member, added with a tone of anger in his voice, “Nobody is taking care of it. Nor do they (department officers), pay any attention to it though they are aware that the center is being run there only under socio-political influence.”

There was no second opinion on what Shankuntala and Vinod said. Intensive discussion on what should be done in this situation to bring the center to the habitation took place. Finally, it was decided that the members will place the request in front of Village Pradhan.

When the Pradhan was approached, he asked for sometime to take stock of the situation and think. After sometime, he was contacted again. This time, he asked them to take the issue to the Child Development Project Officer (CDPO). When contacted third time, he gave consent from his side. Soon an application addressed to CDPO was prepared and signed by all the residents of the habitation. The application was then submitted to the CDPO.

The CDPO tried to avoid uttering words like ‘I will see’, ‘I will think’, ‘If we shift the center, people of the village will be annoyed’, etc. Actually, as per the initial survey, the center was sanction for the habitation only but it was being operated in the main village under unlawful influence.

The members of the Bal Adhikaar Manch however continued their efforts. They kept their pressure on with continuous contact. Finally, factual investigation was carried out by the CDPO and shifting of the center was ordered. Inhabitants of the main village did not support the order but when facts were presented in front of them, they were left with no excuse.

Presently the center is operating in the habitation. All the eligible women and children of the habitation are getting benefitted from it. Good attendance and chirruping of toddlers is always observed. Bal Adhikaar Manch members are keeping eye on its working. Everyone is happy. Their reality of rightlessness has transformed into reality of rightfulness.

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19. Follow us, else…

Today it was the wage distribution day. Chameli Devi was happy that now she will have some money in her hands and tomorrow she would be able to get grocery items from local bazaar. Apart from the kitchen utilities, she will be able to fulfill the long pending requirements of her children.

Due to the delay in payment their economic condition had become tough. The entire family was facing a lot of hardships.

It was getting dark. Children had gone to bed after a long eager wait of their father. Chameli kept waiting. Late in the night, her husband came home. Unexpectedly, he was upset. Chameli got worried – wage hasn’t been paid even today or it is something else has occurred. She quietly brought tea but husband refused, “I don’t feel like having it”

“Why? What’s the matter? Tell me.” Chameli finally gathered courage to ask.

After a lot of soft insistence husband opened his mouth, “I lost the whole of the wage in gambling”.

It was shocking. Chameli’s head shook as if a heavy ice block has hit it. All her plans shattered in a second. But she was tolerant. She controlled herself. There was no point in arguing. Somehow, she managed last meal of the day and went to the bed.

Throughout the night Chameli wasn’t able to sleep. Her husband’s addiction kept on bothering her – what she should do with him, how she should make her ends meet, is there any way out, etc. Next morning, when she went to the hand pump to fetch water, she heard similar story from other women. All of them were facing more or less same kind of hardship.

The village which is being referred to in the above incidence is Umarahaa. It is a small village of 62 families which is located 3 km far from the block headquarters Chiraigaon and 8 km from district headquarters Varanasi. Population of the village is 400 and wage labour is the only source of livelihood here.

Chameli and all the other women decided to meet in the afternoon. Supportive
men like Mehar ji and Abdul ji also joined. The issue of gambling in the village was discussed at length. Finally a resolution was made, “Whatever is happening in this village is not good. Families are getting ruined. Children are getting adversely affected. Gambling has to be stopped immediately. All of us should talk in our neighbourhood and tomorrow onwards wherever people are found to be gambling, we will go collectively & talk to them straightly”

The resolution was followed. Everybody got together on the pre-decided time. Some men and children were also there with them. All of them went to the place where men were gambling. Warning was issued, “Whatever you are doing is not good. Your habits are troubling your families a lot. We want all of you to think in favor of families & children. For their sake quit this ill habit of gambling and betting. This is the first time when we are asking you to stop the menace and we hope that nothing of the sort would be repeated in future in this village.”

The culprits were caught red handed and therefore could not deny. In front of such a gathering, which included women and children of their own families, they had no option other accepting the misdeed and committing that they will not repeat again.

For the entire week, everyone kept their eyes watchful. Most of the men did not repeat but a few started again. Once again a group of 10 women moved out and caught them playing. This time they were warned more strictly, “Follow the prohibition, else we will approach to police for action against you.”

Upon hearing about action by police, the culprits got on track. They apologized immediately and promised of not playing any such game in future.

Today Umarahaa is free from gambling. People are keeping watch. In fact, they are now thinking to come out with some well founded social norms so that gambling is not repeated and rights of women and children are protected.

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20. Toilet

Reena and Meena had to go to toilet. They sought permission from their teacher and came out of the class. But when they went towards the facility they found boys going in and out. They waited for some time but situation continued. They decided to go out of the school campus but situation here too was similar. Boys and passers were always there in the view. Finally they decided to go to their respective homes.

By the time they could return, the period was over. They were disappointedly saying, “This is wrong. How is it possible for girls to use toilets without door?”

Both of the girls are members of Bal Manch which has been constituted in the village. They decided to raise the issue there.

This situation was being faced by the girls of Pre-Secondary School, Kamauli. Kamauli comes under Chiraigaon block of district Varanasi. Distance of this village from block headquarters is 7 km and from district headquarters it is located 15 km far. Around 100 families of Rajbhar community reside in this village. Total population is about 300. Main source of their income is daily wage labour.

Reena and Meena put up their problem in the Bal Manch meeting. Other girl members supported them. After some discussion it was decided that Meena and Gopal will take up this problem to the Bal Adhikaar Manch.
These children were heard in Bal Adhikaar Manch on priority and the issue raised by them was discussed sensitively. Members knew that the issue has direct bearing on the admission and retention of girls in school and is deeply related with their protection and self esteem. It is also an issue related with dignity of the civil society. In such a situation, it was decided that Sadaanand, Jaalandhar & Ram Shankar will talk to the School Principal and Pradhan ji to find out a solution to the problem. If required, the Manch will go for further action.

Next day, all three of the members met with the Principal. Principal told that he has already raised the issue in front of Pradhan ji no thing has happened yet. Looking at the new dimension of the issue, members suggested, “Let us organize a meeting in the school itself and invite Pradhan ji to attend it.”

The Principal liked the idea. Day of meeting was fixed. The three community members met with the Pradhan ji and insisted, “On Saturday, we are organizing a meeting in school. There are some issues which sought to be sorted out. School administration, you and Bal Adhikaar Manch will discuss about them and try to resolve them so that child friendly environment is developed in school.”

Pradhan ji and the other villagers reached school on time. Before the meeting could be initiated, Pradhan ji, who was aware of the issue of the toilet and was anticipating query from school administration and community members, declared, “I have arranged the doors for the rest room, they will be fixed within next 2-3 days”.

Everyone appreciated the declaration with a round of applause. Other problems related with the school were then taken up for the discussion one-by-one. Their solutions were discussed and responsibilities of action were divided. The Principal and the Pradhan ji were impressed by the quality of participation of the villagers.

Within a few days, doors of the toilets were fixed. Students, especially girls were felt a lot of relief. They felt that community members are becoming sensitive towards their issues. This made them happier. Action on other problems has also started taking place. Both Bal Manch as well as Bal Adhikaar Manch are feeling encouraged with the success of the effort.
21. The Most Precious Ornament

Whenever Seema and Chanda used to look at the girls of their age going to school, they used to turn sad and wished if they too could study further. After passing out class 5, their parents did not allow them to study further because girls’ education was of no importance to the people of Ledoopur village.

Over these days, however, a lot of discussions regarding issues related to children and child rights have started taking place in the village. Recently, a forum has been set up by the adults to look into such matter. Bal Adhikaar Manch is the name given to this forum. Similarly, children have also come up with a forum, namely Bal Manch, to look into the matters concerning themselves.

Seema and Chanda are also members of this Bal Manch and take part in its activities on regular basis. So when issue of gender biased behaviour of the community was being discussed in one of its meeting, they felt that they should raise their voice in it. Chanda stood up and asked, “Our brothers are perusing their studies further but we are not allowed, is this not a discrimination against us?”

It was a big question why it is happening and how it can be stopped was beyond the understanding of the children. But everybody was clear and unanimous on one point that girls should also have equal right to study further. A list was made in which, names of the girls, who had dropped studies after class 5 was prepared. Names of Seema, Chanda, Laali, Premlata, Pooja, Rukmani and many others emerged in this process. It was decided that the list will be handed over to the Bal Adhikaar Manch so that they are able to work out to some way to get these girls back to school and ensure their right to education.

As indicated earlier, this village is Ledoopur, which falls in Chiraigaon block of Varanasi district. Distance of this village from block headquarters is 5 km, while from district headquarters it is located 8 km far. With around 80 families residing in its lap, the population of this village is around 1000. All these families belong to a scheduled caste and depend upon wage labour to earn a square meal.

When the list reached Bal Adhikaar Manch the matter was thought upon seriously. Members decided to talk to the parents of these girls.
When collective meeting involving the parents of these girls was organized, the importance of education of girl child was highlighted. It was explained that education is the most precious kanyadaan. It is more precious than all the expensive ornaments and other gifts her together. The explanation and the peer group pressure proved effective and after some discussions parents of these girls agreed to continue their education. Sunita, Bharti, Amar Kumar, Chandra Shekhar and Indravati came forward and took the responsibility of getting these girls admitted in the school.

The five of them went to school, the next day itself, and spoke with the Principal. The Principal was ready to admit these girls and suggested, “Girls who have left their education more than 2 years back, will have to put in extra efforts to cover up and reach at par with children of their age who are regular.”

Bal Adhikaar Manch took up the responsibility. Girls were admitted to grade 6. To help them cover up fast, Chandra Shekhar, an educated and committed village youth, who is also active member of Bal Adhikaar Manch, was assigned responsibility of tutoring them after school hours.

All the girls are happy with the arrangement. None of them has any complaints with their parents or other community members. Their teachers are also happy with their pace of learning. Community members are also happy. They know that they are giving their daughters the true kanyadaan which nobody can steal.

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22. Habitation of Hope

A marriage procession was in progress on the streets of Varanasi. While the bridegroom was smiling in his expensive customary attire and well decorated car, and his relatives and friends were dancing and enjoying on the tunes of the band, about 12 to 15 shabbily dressed children with gloomy faces were circumventing and moving as per the directions of the band master bridegrooms relatives and photographers. These children were employed by the band for carrying pots of electrical lamps on their shoulders. The lamps were connected in a series through electrical wires with a generator which was following the procession. The children were off and on shifting the pot of tube lights from one shoulder to the other so that the likely pain in hands, neck, back and legs is minimized and they are able to carry the pots throughout the procession. Along with the pain, the other miseries that these children are exposed to blinding lights, deafening noise, risk of electrical shock, as well as, scolding by the band master and other people.

These children are from Aashapur village which is located in Chiraigaon block of Varanasi district. It is situated at a distance of 10 k.m. from block as well as district headquarters.

There is a forum of children below 18 yrs of age in this village which is known as Bal Manch. Apart from recreation, this forum engages in discussions on issues related with children. These include grave issues like child marriage, child labour, proper nutrition and education of children, etc.

Today too, similar discussion was on. During the discussion, Raj Kumar stood up and said, “Maximum children of this village, including Ravi Shankar, Moorat, Raj Tilak, Raajan, etc., work as lamp carrying labourers in marriage processions. They pay more attention to this work than their studies and do not go to school regularly. Their parents too are least bothered about them.”

“What should be done in this situation” - when this question arose, children decided that they will never get involved in child labour.

“As far as we are concerned this decision is fine but what if our parents refuse to agree with us.
To avoid any such problem we should make Bal Adhikaar Manch members aware about our decision,” Maya suggested.

Other children were also in agreement with Maya. So, her suggestion was followed. Bal Adhikaar Manch members itself has been constituted with the mandate of protecting rights of children, encouraging them to express their feelings, respect their viewpoints. It, therefore, resolved to support the decision of Bal Manch and ensure that these children, instead of going for work, go to school.”

Few such parents, who used to send children for lamp carrying labour and were already there in the meeting, expressed their commitment to abandon the ill-practice of child labour with immediate effect. Others were personally contacted by four of the members who had taken this responsibility - Mahendra, Maya Devi, Ram Naresh and Pankaj. While some of those contacted agreed to send to school instead of sending them for child labour, others posed excuse of poor economic condition of the family.

When the four members shared the response of the parents with the rest of the members during their next meeting, it was felt that the issue is complicated and requires long term action. It was decided that possibility of aid to such families through different government schemes like BPL card facilities, pensions, NREGA etc. will be explored while efforts of convincing them will be continued.

Not much success has been achieved in terms of protecting children from child labour in the above manner till date. But the efforts made in this regard cannot be termed as useless. Significant successes in terms of awareness generated and applications submitted under different schemes reflect that the situation is bound to improve in the future. In the village, whose name itself means ‘habitation of hope’, a ray of hope is visible that will put the true light of education, and not that of electrical lamps and tube lights, in the hands of its children and will illuminate their life forever.

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23. Every Problem has a Solution

Evening time of around 3 or 4 p.m. Men, women and children are returning back to their slum. All of them are carrying plastic silos on their shoulders. These silos contain waste plastic bottles, polythene carry bags, glass and iron wastes and some other such disposables. Today, they had returned a bit early from there work because a film show was scheduled in the slum for them. As it was scheduled after prior contact with the residents as per their convenience, they all were back on time. After unloading the silos in their respective huts and freshening up, all the people got together on the pre-decided venue.

The film that was shown was carrying a set of stories of ‘Meena’. Meena is a locally contextual child friendly girl character created by UNICEF to generate awareness about child rights in India. The stories woven around this character carried messages related with importance of education for children including girls, ill-affects of child marriage, dowry and gender based discrimination, proper heath and care of children, child protection etc.

Everybody watched the film. The show was followed by a discussion on the issue raised by the film. It was beginning of mobilization on the issue of child rights in the slum. Viewers raised a lot of questions like how long the organization is going to work in the slum. The process of meeting with the people and children and developing rapport with them continued further.

The habitation which is being referred to in the above story includes two adjoining slums which are collectively known as “Kachchi Basti 3 & 4”. In both of them combined, a total 70 families reside. All of them belong to Muslim community and are from West Bengal. Bengali is
their mother tongue but they can understand and speak Hindi as well. All the family members of these families are involved in rag-picking. On an average day, rag-picking earns them around Rs. 100/- per person. Even children make it to around Rs. 50. Their life goes on with this earning in a hut which is built by holding up tarpaulin sheet with the support of a bamboo or wooden pole.

It is hard to say, how much did the people of the slum understood from the Meena film and the discussion. But it was easy to make out that the children thoroughly enjoyed it and this showed up a ray of hope. These children did want to study but their work, economic condition of their families and poor understanding of their parents were the obstacles in their path of education. Getting them admitted in nearby government school where education is free was difficult because school time used to clash with their work hours. And children's income was a source of livelihood for the family, hence could not be parted with.

As the process of thinking and discussion went on, children themselves came out with a suggestion, “If someone can teach us for an hour or so, after our return from work, we will be able to study”.

The suggestion involved cost of honorarium to the teacher. Parents were not ready. There were other issues to be resolved as well like who will teach the children and how long will he or she teach them, etc. Children came out with a solution again, “When we are willing to study and we ourselves are earning can’t we pay the expenses through our own pocket.”

Parents were silent but children were giving their consent. Each one of them was coming out with how much he can pay. One was saying, “I can pay Rs 5”, other was saying “I can pay Rs 7”, some third child was saying, “I can pay Rs 2 only” and so on.

Finally, after working of the total expected cost, Rs 2 per child was fixed as fees and it was decided that a gullak (earthen piggy bank) will be purchased in which everyone will drop his or her contribution.

Next issue to be resolved was who is going to teach. Children again proved to be smarter. They requested the community organizer, “Didi why don’t you yourself start teaching us for the time being. Other person tutor can be arranged later.”
The excitement and the commitment of the children persuaded the team member to agree to teach them. She promised to come from the next day. When she reached to teach then, she found that children were all set to begin. They had taken bath and had bought pencil. A chair was also lying for her. Children showed their piggy bank also. Necessary teaching leaning material was purchased.

A few days later, teacher was also arranged. She started coming daily on the same time to teach them. Initially the organization bore some of the expenses but it was clear that later on it should be taken care of by parents themselves.

Whether these children will be able study beyond primary level and are able to join formal school is a matter which can not be ascertained at present. But the children have taught at least one lesson to everyone, i.e., every problem has a solution. And they will be able to work out solution for all the problems that will emerge.

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24. The New Environment

Micro level planning was in progress in the Kaunchi. Kaunchi is a village in Chiraigaon development block of Varanasi district. It has about 150 families and its population is 1600. The village has people from all the castes but scheduled caste population holds majority in numeric terms. Agriculture labour is the prime source of occupation for the villagers. The underlying tells what change the community organizer of Prayatn witness in the small village after intervention.

Entire village was together to list out the village problems, prioritize them, explore their solutions and work out a concrete action plan to achieve the solution. Be it Champa Devi, Shankar, Nathuni Ram, Avadh, Bindo Devi, Kevla, Phoola Devi, Chhote Lal, Raj Kumar, Gajanand or anyone else, everyone was enthusiastic. Children were also present along with adults.

When the meeting began, everybody started putting their point. It was as if they were contending to put their point first. So many problems started coming as if the village nothing else but problems and problems only.

We were listening with due patience and seriousness. It was ensured that nobody feels that his or her point has not been heard even if he or she was repeating what other villagers have already told. One of our colleagues was noting down the discussion continuously. Finally the problems were listed down and those which were affecting the entire village were taken on priority. The final problem priority list read as follows:-

- Potable water for all
- Registration under MNREGA and payment of wages
- Laying of kharanja on village roads
- Methodical and continuous functioning of Anganwadi Center
- Immunization
- Home for the poor.

After discussing these problems, their effects were discussed. One the issue of
potable water people said, “There should be around 5 hand pumps in the village. A lot of time and energy is wasted in moving here and there in search of water”. On the issue of NREGA, complaint of the villagers was, “Adequate number of job cards have not been issued while payment of 60 villagers is due since last 1 ½ months”. Nextly, in the absence of kharanja roads, village roads become muddy and children as well as adults face problem in walking over it.

The complaint in relation to the Anganwadi Center was that eligible children, pregnant and lactating women were not getting supplementary nutrition from and immunization was not taking place on regular basis. Finally, many poor families who were eligible to avail subsidized were not getting due support and facilities.

Bal Adhikaar Manch members assured the community people that one-by-one all the problems will be sorted out by community support. Community members in return expressed faith in the Bal Adhikaar Manch and said, “Please go ahead to resolve these problems. Wherever all community members are required, please let us know. We are with you.”

The micro-level planning concluded with such decisions. Now it was the turn of Bal Adhikaar Manch. They called their forum meeting and divided responsibilities as follows:

Potable water – Champa Devi and Shankar were delegated the responsibility. They prepared an application with the details of requirement of hand pumps.

MNREGA job card and payment: - This responsibility was delegated to Nathuni Ram and Avadh. They enlisted the people who have not been granted job under the programme in spite of application and those whose payment of wage is due with necessary details.

Anganwadi, Immunization and housing: - Phoola Devi and Chhotu Lal took the responsibility of preparing details in this regard.

It was seen that most of the problems were concerned with Pradhan, Block Development Officer and CDPO. Therefore, calling them to the village and talking with them in front of all the villagers will be better. Responsibility of organizing interface with these duty bearers was delegated to Rajkumar, Gajanand and
Community Organizer of Prayatn.

February 8, 2010, was the day of excitement and new hope for the villagers of Kaunchi village. All the three duty bearers were in the village. Community members were fully prepared. After a formal note of welcome, the responsible Bal Adhikaar Manch members came up with their issues one-by-one and gave the details in written form as well.

This was for the first time when community people were placing their issues and demand in front the government and panchayat representatives in a highly organized and decent manner. After a session of discussions, the government and panchayat representatives humbly accepted their responsibilities, assured prompt solution. The Government Community Interface concluded with a vote of thanks.

Within a week’s time resolution of complaints started appearing

- 3 new hand pumps were fixed
- Due MNREGA wage payment was made.
- Anganwadi operations became consistent and smooth. Distribution of supplementary nutrition regularized while immunization also became regular.
- 4 eligible families got grant for house construction
- Construction of Kharanja road and Anganwadi Center are in progress

The environment of Kaunchi has changed after the above mentioned developments. Children and adults collect immediately as soon as I enter the village and greet me with warmth. The village appears clean with the construction of Kharanja. Queues of woman and children for fetching water have disappeared. Voices of young children echo with vibrancy when one passes across the front of the Anganwadi center. Every face now radiates self-confidence, mutual trust and happiness.

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