



On the Record: Global Movement for Children

Issue 2: Educating Ajay

From the AP Editorial Desk



"If everyone took it upon themselves to educate just one disadvantaged child, we'd see our whole society turn around," says 80 year-old Usha Maira who has spent countless decades educating her servant's

Ajay takes a study break: 80 year-old Usha Maira helps 9 year-old Ajay earn more from recycling

children and setting up schools and workshops for the low-income women who worked in her late husband's bicycle factory.

"It's my duty to help those less fortunate," she says, referring to the spiritual concept of dharma or (duty). "If everyone interpreted the notion of dharma in civic terms as a call to help at least one person every day, we could really change things."

For nine-year old Ajay, who helps his family collect trash in Maira's exclusive New Delhi neighborhood, a lot has changed since he met Usha Maira.

Thanks to her afternoon tutoring sessions, Ajay can add and subtract as well as read and write Hindi, the national language of India. "At least with these basic skills," says Maira. "he can help his family negotiate prices with trash recyclers. That, in turn, has advanced his status within the family."

"I told Ajay's mother that with all the money they're earning, she could certainly afford to send her children to school," says Maira. "She told me that sending her children to school meant she had to choose between spending money on school uniforms and books,

or food. She chose the latter and I can't blame her."

The choice between education or sustenance for a child in India has become an increasingly difficult one, as the pressures of globalization force the rural poor into cities for work. Ajay's family left their village of Aligarh in the neighboring state of Uttar Pradesh. They came to the Indian capital in search of work when the family farm began suffering because of a drought in the northern part of the country.

Ajay and his family go door to door every morning and empty trash cans in Maira's neighborhood. (See box). In the afternoons, he also works as a domestic servant at a house down the street from Maira, sweeping and cleaning. There, he gets lunch and minimal pay for his work.



When he finishes his work around 3 p.m., he heads over to Maira's home for a lesson in reading, writing and basic arithmetic. Maira also tutors a young girl whose parents are refugees from Tibet.

"We play a lot of board games too," says Maira. "I think it's important for these children to have fun. Furthermore, some of the games we play help him with his math skills. For instance, he has to add when he rolls two dice or count when he moves forward on a board game."

*Hard Work for Small Rewards:
Ajay's Family Takes Out the Trash*

Informal Networking – the New Extended Family

Usha Maira isn't the only one participating in the GMC without really knowing it.

Take Kamal, a friend of Maira's who runs an informal school for the children of construction workers on the border of New Delhi and Harayana state. There, she says, she and a few other volunteers teach the children to read, write and do basic arithmetic while their fathers work on dangerous construction sites nearby, and their mothers work as domestic help in middle-class neighborhoods. "I started this project by reaching out to the children at a construction site in my neighborhood," says Kamal. "Soon, other housewives in the area became interested in helping and now we have a little outdoor school house for these children."



Ajay the ragpicker

Every morning Ajay and his family go door to door to empty trash cans in Maira's neighborhood. They sort the trash into plastics, paper items, and vegetable or fruit peel and

then sell what they can to recyclers. In India, they're called "ragpickers," an informal workforce that is primarily comprised of slum or street children. Officially, India has a total of 11 million child laborers. The unofficial number, according to non-governmental organizations and activists, is at least 100 million, giving India the largest number of child laborers in the world. Of those who work as ragpickers, more than 50 percent sustain injuries because of their work. And it is primarily this population of poor and disenfranchised youth that have never stepped foot in a classroom. Only one-third of all Indian young people are enrolled in school.

And, in a letter sent to UNICEF by a high school student, another example of the GMC unfolds: "When I got the pamphlet which says 'yes' for children...I wanted to know more about it. I want to be part of UNICEF. I am not working, i.e., I am not earning but want to contribute my talent or my time or even my pocket money to help others. I want my country to be an educated one. I even teach my servant. And I want to convey the message, 'stop the growing population.'"

This informal, grassroots networking often operates on the principle of the extended family. Servants and their children are effectively "adopted" by some of the middle and upper class families they serve. But the NGO community is also making a difference in the lives of floating populations of poor, working or homeless children. Ankur is one of many organizations that run educational programs for street children living in and around the busy Charbagh Railway station in the central Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. They call their UNICEF-supported project "Comeback Childhood." It provides a learning space for children who live near the railway station or work there polishing shoes or selling refilled mineral bottles, twigs as toothpicks, or pan masala (a digestive sweet). Children come to the Ankur school by choice and often because they see what a good time their peers are having.

Every day the children decide what they want to learn and that's why they keep returning, says Sashi, an Ankur staff member. "I started coming to school the day I saw a group of children singing," says eight year-old Sona. "I wanted to see what was going on, so I joined in." Listening to stories, playing snakes & ladders, reading picture books and painting are just a few of the daily activities at the school.

And this educational model is far from unique. Outside railway stations in Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore and other Indian cities and towns NGOs are spearheading participatory, community-based models of education for children on the margins of society.

Caste, Class and Gender Discrimination

None of this is enough for Jyotsna Chatterjee, Executive Director of the New Delhi-based Joint Women's Program (JWP).

"The real culprit here is caste, class and gender discrimination," she says. "This is what leads to the phenomenon of street and working children. Until political and social elites do something about this discrimination, social divides will continue regardless of all the well-meaning schools set up by citizens or activists."

Chatterjee speaks from experience. Her organization runs a school for prostitutes' children on GB road, the Indian capital's red light district that lies in Old Delhi. She has known many children who have been prevented from advancing in life simply because of their lineage.

"Last year," explains Chatterjee, "one of our students passed 12th grade and wanted to attend college and eventually become a doctor. She had the grades and the talent and we were willing to pay for her tuition. But the school wanted to know who her parents were and that's where the discrimination began."

Although JWP has been able to either hide a child's lineage from school principals or establish cooperative relationships with more open-minded schools, the deeper problems persist of a society divided against itself. Chatterjee points out that abuse of servants, who are generally from the so-called "backward castes," is also rampant among upper and middle class households.