

Girl Star

GIRL STAR PROJECT

Despite a major improvement in literacy rates in India over the past decade, the number of children who are not in school remains high. Gender disparities in education persist with far more girls than boys failing to complete primary school.

The national literacy rate of girls over seven years is 54% against 75% for boys. In the Northern Hindi-speaking states of India, girls literacy rates are particularly low, ranging between 33 – 50%.

Although lower primary schools are within one kilometer of 94 percent of India's population, at an average every second girl child in India has not been enrolled. While the enrolment rate is high in urban areas, it is conspicuously low in rural areas and amongst the backward and minority communities. The disparity is also regional with higher literacy rate across the Southern and North-Eastern states, but very low in some of the most densely populated Northern states. In Uttar Pradesh, the most populated state in India with a population of 172 million (larger than that of Brazil which ranks the fourth most populated country in the world) an average of only one out of four girls is enrolled in the upper primary school. Amongst the marginalized communities in the state of Bihar, the situation is far worse where only one out of every six girls is literate. The national average shows that there are twice as many illiterate women as there are men.

UNICEF, NGOs and other bilateral agencies have partnered government efforts to improve literacy levels in states that have the largest numbers of out-of-school children or dropouts, with a focus on girls of marginalized and minority communities which have the highest levels of illiteracy.

The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* programme for universalisation of primary education and the *Mahila Samakhya* programme which has set up alternative learning centres for imparting education and providing empowering skills to girls from disadvantaged communities, are among the major initiatives to improve literacy levels.

The "Girl Star" project is a series of films which documents stories of girls from the most disadvantaged communities across five Northern states who, through attaining education, have managed to break the shackles of socio-economic constraints to make a success of their lives and become self sufficient. These young women have grown to become role models in their communities, who inspire younger girls to go to school and continue their education. They have selected professions from the most conventional such as teaching and nursing, to the most unconventional like archery, bee-keeping, scrap management, often entering what has traditionally been a man's domain.

The selection of characters for the films is from ordinary rural settings which the masses can identify with. These short films will be used as a tool at different levels : to motivate parents to ensure that their daughters go to school and do not drop out, to enthuse girls to attend school, to generate a demand within the community for quality education. The films will also be used to influence policy and mobilise resources.

CELEBRATING GIRL POWER



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Navjyoti Neelam Bhandari sharing her dreams

By Vidya Kulkarni

Fourteen year old Pallavi, a Class IX student, dreams of becoming a nurse. However, cultural barriers haunt her, as she is the daughter of a Devdasi (a traditional dancing woman). Devdasis are treated as social outcastes and their children, especially girls, are expected to follow their path. But Pallavi has no intention of getting into this antiquated practice and with her mother's support continues to pursue her education.

Such stories of courage and determination unfolded at the 'Navjyoti' programme organised on 22nd November 2007 in Mumbai. Navjyotis are girls who have dared to dream.

This special award for girls instituted jointly by UNICEF and DD Sahyadri in 2004, is meant to give recognition to their achievements and extend support to fulfill their dreams.

Every year nine girls from various districts in Maharashtra are selected for this prestigious honor.

Said Begur Ramchandra Rao, Project Officer, Education, at UNICEF, "This programme has a lot of impact in the field. Though only nine girls are selected for the award, it has a ripple effect in motivating several other girl children in pursuing their education."

This year's winners include; Rajeela Padvi, Nandurbar, Sana Phatima (Parbhani), Laxmi Gauddas, Chandrapur, Pallavi Waghmare, Sangli, Neelam Bhandari, Mumbai, Vaishali Pendore, Yaotmal, Geeta Yadav, Kolhapur, Amrapali Dhavale, Latur and Jyoti Indurkar, Mumbai.

Celebrities from Mumbai's film and corporate world were present to offer awards and encourage its recipients.

Specially made audio-visual clips provided a glimpse into the social and family environments of the 'Navjyoti' girls and also showed the grave challenges that they overcame.



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Group of Navjyotis

Geeta Yadav comes from a single parent family. Her mother has shouldered all family responsibility and managed to her three children's education completed. Geeta, who respects her mother immensely, wants to study hotel management.

Sana Phatima from Parbhani comes from an extremely poor family. Being blind, her father is unable to work and the family survives on meager income earned by her mother's work as a housemaid.

Sana started sharing household responsibility at a very young age. Now she attends full time school and works in the evening. She makes and sells papads and earns Rs.5 every day. Sana, a Class IX student, wants to become a doctor.

Laxmi Gaudas also combines work with her studies. She works as a housemaid to supplement the family income. But that doesn't stop her from dreaming "mai pilot banana chahti hu, asman chuna chahti hu." (I want to become a pilot and touch the sky), says Laxmi with twinkling eyes.

Neelam Bhandari and Jyoti Indurkar were both brought up in an orphanage in Mumbai. Her life experiences have taught her to be positive and confident. Neelam says, "Whatever happened in the past is not a matter of concern for me now. I look forward to the future and want to become a social worker." Jyoti is a nature lover and creative person. She wants to become an interior designer.

Most expressed that the struggle these girls go through is a laudable reflection of reality. The Navjyoti event as usual succeeded in bringing the shine of girls out of shadows.

TEACHING A DIFFERENT LESSON



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VILLAGERS GATHER IN LARGE NUMBER NOTWITHSTANDING HEAT WAVE TO WATCH SCREENING OF SHORT FILMS ON GIRL STARS

By Arun Anand

Babina, Jhansi, UP : Unperturbed by the hot May sun, Rekha Sahu, a primary school teacher in Khajuraho Bujurg village, in the Babina block of Jhansi district, was excited because her long wait to have a glimpse of the Girl Stars was going to end soon.

Her students, about one hundred of them, were more thrilled as they wanted to know how girls from ordinary backgrounds like themselves could make it so big in life. And then the moment for which everyone was waiting finally arrived.

A pink colourfully posterred truck arrived with a team escorted by the village pradhan and invited everyone in the village, especially the women and the girls, to attend the screening of three 'interesting' and 'inspiring' films that could change their lives.

The films, about seven minutes each, are being screened in several villages as part of the 'Girl Stars' project of UNICEF, currently underway in UP, Rajasthan and Bihar.

In UP, this mobile theatre is travelling to around 64 villages in four districts - Bahraich, Varanasi, Jhansi and Lalitpur. The films depict the real life stories of Shabnam, Madhuri and Sandhya. All three belong to UP.

They are being projected as role models to inspire the rural folk, especially the girls and women. The impact has been quite positive as common people, cutting across age and social barriers, in villages under Babina block were thrilled with the movies.

"There is a great awareness about the education of girls in this area but somehow it still remains confined to basic literacy levels. The social taboos are still strong and hardly 10 percent of the girls make it to the high school, and an even lesser number to the college," says Anil Kumar Srivastava, coordinator at Block Resource Centre, a government establishment that looks after the basic education institutions at the block level in this state.



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Children wait eagerly for arrival of "Mobile screening truck" in Khajuraho Bujurg village in Jhansi district of UP.

Srivastava says, "There is a need to create awareness and inspire people here to ensure that girls at least complete their school education. We need to have some role models for this purpose and the 'Girl Stars' project is a great way to motivate them."

In Bijauli village, couple of miles away from Khajuraho Khurd, five-year-old Shobha, who studies in Class V announced during the public address held after the screening of the films, "I want to become like them. I want to be a doctor. I will study very hard and will not stop going to school come what may."

Sonu, seven, who belonged to the same village, told a crowd of about 100, "Like Madhuri Didi, who ran a shop as a child to study, if my family is not ready to pay for my studies, I will earn my way through and become a pilot when I grow up."

Similarly, Shobha said that she particularly liked the way Sandhya made it big in life. "I want to learn computers like Sandhya didi and I am sure I will be able to do that."

Dayanand Verma, 39, who works in a factory, said he had four children and he wanted them to study and achieve something in life. Verma and many others in the village were particularly impressed by the short film on Sandhya's life.

She runs a computer-training centre for lower and middle-income groups in the Babina block itself. "We never knew that girls living just a few miles away from our villages have crossed milestones. This, of course, makes us believe that our children can also do it."

The mood of the villagers was so upbeat that an approaching dust storm could not dampen their spirits. They made the show sound like war cry, "padle bitiya, likh le bitiya, akshar-akshar chun le bitiya." (Daughter – read, write and chose your words.)

They took a vow to make their children study and enable them enter the galaxy of the 'Girl Stars'.

GIRL STARS TWINKLE IN UP'S DUSTY VILLAGES



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Mobile theatres are ready to screen the films on three girl stars in Simarwara villa of Babina block, Jhansi district

By Arun Anand

Babina, Jhansi, UP: They are the "real stars", who attract crowds, applause and rave reviews for their achievements in the most remote of Uttar Pradesh's villages. Perhaps also because they make almost everyone believe that dreams can come true.

Shabnam Ara, Madhuri Kumari and Sandhya Sherring are among the 15 Girl Stars chosen by UNICEF, whose struggles to educate themselves were screened on video by mobile theatres across UP.

After the project was launched on the 8th of May 2007 in New Delhi, three colourful trucks equipped with audio/video and public address systems were flagged off to Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

In UP, the stories of the girl stars reached thousands of villagers through three short films based on their lives. Aged between 17 and 30 years, these three girls belong to the marginalised sections of the society.

The films depict how they struggled against enormous economic and social odds but never lost heart. "That is what gives most of the ordinary rural folk tremendous hope and inspiration," says Praveen Kumar, the project's field coordinator, who has been traveling with the mobile theatre across four districts and 64 villages of UP since 11th May.

Praveen and his colleagues in the truck typically reach a village early in the morning. They make announcements and talk to the villagers inviting them to the "show". Then in the centre of the village they erect a makeshift tent and as villagers start gathering - initially out of curiosity - Praveen and his team get to work with the screening of the videos.

The films are screened on a television with the help of a DVD player as they only have a small generator for the power supply. The show lasts a couple of hours.

Shabnam Ara grew up in Arhora village of Sonbhadra district, Uttar Pradesh. Presently, this 26-year-old gutsy woman is a small loans manager in Cashpor, a micro-finance organisation in Varanasi. When Shabnam was young, she dropped out of school when her father lost his job, but managed to complete her education

by working part-time.

Shabnam learnt how to make carpets at home and managed to enroll herself back in school. She then heard about Cashpor, which was looking for women fieldworkers for its women clientele.



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Women and girls are keen to attend these shows as they gather in Simarwara villae of babina block of Jhansi district.

Shabnam was able to convince many women to take loans and change their lives. During this period, she was promoted three times. She studied at night to finish graduation and today, Shabnam is the branch manager of Cashpor, where she supervises an office of seven men.

Madhuri Kumari has almost a similar story though in a different setting. She is today the Pradhan (Chief) of Fakirpuri village, Bahraich District. But when she was young she had to struggle as the only girl in a class of 26 boys.

Madhuri used to walk six kilometers through a thick forest all by herself to reach school. As she grew up, she wanted to continue her schooling though her father was opposed to it. She did odd jobs for her neighbours to pay for her school supplies.

Soon, with the money she had saved, she opened a small grocery shop. She even managed to earn enough to build her own house. Madhuri was so helpful that people soon asked her to be their leader.

When Madhuri stood for elections and emerged victorious, she was only 21 years old. For the past five years, she has been busy building roads, installing a drainage system in the village, adding new classrooms to the government school and encouraging children in her village to go to school.

Sandhya Sherring, who runs a computer training centre, says, "education is the foundation that makes you a strong pillar. You can do anything – anything at all – if you are educated."

Sandhya too dropped out of school when her father lost his job. After completing her education, she failed to find a decent job and consequently enrolled in a computer institute. After passing out she opened her own institute with a bank loan.

"We can relate to them as these girls are from the villages of UP. They are like us but they have made it. We would like our children to be like that. These films make us believe that our children can also do this," says Omkar Singh of village Simwara, Jhansi.

The mobile theatre screened these films in 28 villages of Jhansi district over a period of two weeks. Earlier the roadshow evoked enthusiastic response in dozens of villages in Varanasi and Bahraich districts. From Jhansi, the mobile theatre moved on to Lalitpur where its six-week journey in UP will come to an end.

'GIRL STARS' A HUGE HIT IN BIHAR VILLAGES



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Girl Star Video screening truck in Muzaffarpur

By Sreenath Cheruvari

As the tastefully decorated pink colored 'Girls Star' truck winds its way along the narrow lanes of Kandwa village raising a trail of dust, scores of children, their eyes wide open in amazement run behind it. The blaring mikes fitted to the truck exhorts the villagers to assemble at the local ground " UNICEF would like to share with you the success stories of some outstanding girls from your village and the difference education can bring to your lives" it announces. Soon the place is swarming with women and children and within a matter of minutes, a makeshift tent is in place. After a brief introduction, a large screen television, showcasing the success stories of three girl stars from Bihar starts playing. As the images become vivid, a hushed silence falls on the crowd.

The first video is that of Anitha Kushwaha, a seventeen year old girl from Muzaffarpur district who had overcome all odds to pursue her education. To fund her studies, she took up beekeeping business and has emerged as a successful entrepreneur with over 100 boxes of bees. Today not only she is earning a good amount but is also pursuing English Honors from a college in Muzaffarpur! The 250 strong crowd comprising of children, women and a fair sprinkling of men are impressed, there is a huge round of applause followed by a fruitful interactive sessions questions, problems and suggestions follow.

The impact is immediate !Seventeen year old Swetha Kumari who is pursuing her intermediate is hopeful that she will be able to pursue her studies and become a doctor "My parents are against me studying further, but I will find a way to support myself, Anita didi's story is so inspiring" Anil Kumar a farmer by profession and a father of six children including two girls says that the success stories is creating the much needed awareness " ladkiyan aaajkal bahuth tharaki kar rahe hai, wo bhi is samaj me kuch kar sakta hai" (girls are doing very well for themselves and have a role to play in contributing for the welfare of the society) He reaffirms his commitment towards educating his girl children

The truck which is making a huge impact in the villages of Bihar is a part of Girl Stars project, a multi media campaign launched by UNICEF in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar to encourage girls to go to

school and motivate the communities they live in to support them. The Bihar leg of 'Girls Star Truck' which was officially flagged off from Patna on the 16th of May will cover sixty villages in the districts of Patna, Muzaffarpur and Gaya and will stress the need for educating girl children and the positive impact it can have in transforming the society.



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Girl Star Video screening truck in Muzaffarpur

The truck during its journey in the villages is showcasing the success stories of three girls Anitha Kushwaha, a beekeeper from Muzaffarpur district, Tehseen Bano, girls hostel warden from Gaya district and Kiran Devi, a Junkyard dealer from Patna district in the form of eight minute films. The films highlight how these young girls have overcome social and economic constraints to carve out a future for themselves and pursue their education. Mr. Bijaya Rajbhandari, State Representative of UNICEF Patna points out the importance of the need to create awareness on such issues. " These films will be used as a tool at different levels to enhance girls education by motivating parents to send their children to schools, encouraging girls to attend schools and to generate a demand within the community for quality education", he says.

Bihar's literacy rate is among the lowest in the country. The total school attendance rate of children in the 6 to 10 age group is 64%. However when compared with boys (71.6%) the attendance rate of girls is quite low at 58.3%. The positive fact is that there has been a marginal increase in female literacy rate from 22 to 34 percent in the last decade. But the situation is worse among the marginalised communities where only one out of every six girl is literate in the state.

Mr. Rajesh Kumar who is coordinating the project at the village level explained the whole process. As soon as the truck enters the village, the coordinator will visit the Mukya or the village headman and will request his cooperation for showing these success stories. He along with the mukya would then contact the school teachers and anganwadi workers to mobilise the crowd before the start of the show. Each screening of the film is followed by question answer sessions wherein the teachers and anganwadi workers are asked to reply to encourage ownership and participation. "The impact so far has been tremendous" he points out.

UNICEF is supporting various state government education programmes in Bihar to reach out to a large number of children especially girls. UNICEF is supporting an initiative called 'Sankalp' which strives to put 2.3 million out of school children in the age group of 6-14 years back to school. UNICEF is also providing support for mobilisation and training of Mahila Samakya women's self help groups and village committees for the promotion of girls schooling.

WHEN STARS CAME VISITING



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Mahatma Gandhi seems to smile benignly on the Girl Stars as they recount the stories of their success against all odds

Girl Stars in the Capital

By Augustine Veliath

New Delhi May 09 : Stars are busy people. Girl stars are no different. During the two days that twelve of them spent in the capital city of New Delhi, they had places to go, people to meet, campaigns to launch and questions to answer.

Selected for their grit, determination and achievements in the face of extreme hardships they were interviewed by the media, the child reporters of Delhi and extensively by the Parliament television channel known as Lok Sabha TV. They also visited the Lok Sabha speaker and other senior officials

The Parliamentary Forum on Children held a special session in their honor. The Convener of the Forum Ms Prema Cariappa M.P. hosted this session in the Parliament Annex.

Among the parliamentarians present were two key ministers. "I am responsible for jobs and there are not enough jobs to go around", said the Minister for Labour Oscar Fernandez.

"But you girls have shown that nobody needs to wait for jobs. With a little initiative and hard work, any one can stand on their feet and support one's families and even become role models. This is the lesson that needs to go all the young people of India."

"You are the perfect ambassadors for doing so", he continued, "because you have done it all. I salute you as the ambassadors of future India."

The Health Ministry will use your films to inspire our 600,000 Ashas (Accredited Social Health Activists), said the Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare Dr Ambumani Ramdoss told the girl stars. Through the Ashas we will inspire many more thousands of girls to become like you—self sufficient, confident and inspiring, he said.

Besides the members of Parliament senior officials from Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and Ministry of Labour engaged the girl stars in dialogue on their achievements and insights.



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The Girl Stars spoke eloquently about their struggles and triumph in the special session of the parliamentary forum on children convened to honour them in Delhi

On May 09 Girl stars assembled at the Gandhi Smriti, the place where Mahatma Gandhi spent the last 144 days of his life and attained martyrdom.

Interacting with the girl stars, Ms Tara Gandhi Bhattacharjee, a renowned social worker and grand daughter of Mahatma Gandhi said "it is significant that you are launching the campaign from these premises. Basic education that is relevant and empowering was so close to Bapu's heart."

"You are actually contributing to the unfulfilled parts of Gandhiji's dream for India" added Dr Savita Singh, Director of Gandhi Smriti and a Gandhian scholar.

"These girls are an inspiration for all and people must be told about their struggle," said UNICEF representative in India, Cecilio Adorna, just after launching of the campaign. "Gandhiji is not only a role model of leadership for the entire world, he was also one of the greatest champions of women's education and emancipation", Adorna added.

The campaign vehicles were flagged off by Ms Tara Gandhi Bhattacharjee, Dr Savita Singh and Mr Cecilio Adorna. the UNICEF representative to India in the presences of girl stars and a crowd of enthusiastic young people.

The multimedia vehicles will take the road show to villages in Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, where girl's education indicators are low. For the next 30 days through these fifteen films communities in 180 villages will engage in an open dialogue about the importance of educating girls, and the power of education to transform lives.

THIS RECESS BELONGED TO THE FUTURE



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Suryamani, the environmentalist from Jharkhand

Girl Stars shine in Parliament

By Augustine Veliath

New Delhi May 08 : When a volatile and turbulent House of the People (Lok Sabha) adjourn for lunch where does the Speaker go?

As the heat on the discussions on "fake encounters" subsided on May 08, the Speaker, Somnath Chatterjee and his team of senior officials decided to invest their time in listening to 12 genuine women achievers otherwise known as Girl Stars.

Selected by UNICEF with the help of Going to School, a non profit organization involved in education, they had come to Delhi from four of India's poorest states, twelve of India's poorest communities.

Once their homes were the poorest too. But not any more, because as "girl stars" they took their destiny into their hands. They have a message to other girls (and boys too) "if we did it, you can do it too".

The women achievers who dared - all in their twenties - shared their secrets of success with the Speaker and his senior team, consisting of Prema Cariappa M.P. the Convenor of the Parliamentary Forum for Children, P.D.T Achary, the Secretary General of Lok Sabha, Ms T. Kumar, the Principal Secretary to the Speaker and Bhasker Ghosh, the distinguished communication advisor.

The Girl Stars lived up to their name. They were bold, articulate and outright inspirational in their answers.

"Are you a part of a non governmental organization?" the Speaker asked Suryamani, the environmental activist from the tribal state of Jharkhand. "No I am part of a people's movement" was the reply. It was not difficult to guess who was leading that movement.

"I hated Mathematics in school" said Kiran from Patna who only made it to class nine. "But today I tell every one it is your arithmetic that will keep you in business." She should know. She runs many businesses in the capital of Bihar. "My husband is a little shy", she confided in the Speaker. "But he is a great support to me and my mother-in-law means the world to me", she said. "Never, never neglect education", she added.



The Girls Stars pose happily with ministers and MPs. In the centre is Dr. A. Ramadoss (in white), Minister of Health, and to his right Mr. Oscar Fernandes, and Dr. Prema Cariappa, Convenor of the Forum (in orange saree)

"You must learn to turn your adversities into advantages" said Anuradha the medical student from Jodhpur. "Never mind the polio, I intend to become a neuro-surgeon, she confided in the Speaker. "You will be", said Mr Chatterjee, "one of the best nuero-surgeons in the country". " Help comes when you seek it", Anuradha was confident.

"I was the first girl to study and teach computer in my home town in Babina near Jhansi" that was Sandhya Sherring from Uttar Pradesh. "Now because of me more girls want to learn computers. Since girls come boys do not want to be left behind. For a great future send girls to school", she added

"When you are on your way up your relations, friends and neighbors will discourage you. But when you reach the top they will lavish you with praise. The secret of success is not being affected by either." Anita Kushwaha, the bee keeper from Muzaffarpur has yet another secret to share.

"Supervising men is not difficult. What is important is to be useful and helpful to people", Shabnam Aara the loan manager from Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh says. She supervises seven men as Branch manager.

"Dream and never lose hope, that is the ultimate formula of success." Jyoti Rose Tirkey, the radio and television announcer and the very popular folk artist from Lohardagga in Jarkhand has this advise for other young people. "Keep learning. Education, and education alone is the key". Jyoti is the only girl star who has traveled abroad.

In listening to inspirational stories of the Girl Stars, the Speaker and his team were honoring a new tradition of the Indian Parliament, that of listening to children and young people of India.

In every session, as advised by the Speaker, the Parliamentary Forum on Children and UNICEF facilitate a visit of children and young people from different parts of the country to the Lok Sabha, the 552 strong lower house of Indian Parliament.

The young people once in the capital, watch the proceedings of the House, interact with the Speaker in his chamber are interviewed by the Lok Sabha Channel.

"This was my education" said the Speaker as his "session with the future India" was adjourned, till the next group of young people arrive in Delhi. That will be the next session of parliament.

BIHAR'S GIRL STARS ARE SHINING LIGHTS FOR OTHERS



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Kiran's junk business

By Anupam Srivastava

These girls were born in families that found it hard to make the ends meet. Girls of their background did not go to school, leave alone have a career. But they did, and with astounding success. They have been chosen as "girl stars" under a UNICEF-supported project run by 'Going to School' an NGO, that sought examples of courage and success among girls and women in India.

Meet Kiran Devi, Tehseen Bano, and Anita Khushwaha of Bihar. Each one has a different story -- a story in which they are winners. Today, they are role models for other girls.

Scene one: A junkyard in Patna filled with old tyres, broken television sets, stacks of newspapers, bottles and phased out items. Enter: a woman who surveys her surroundings, evaluates the value of her goods, gives instructions and money to a number of men. They return in the evening with the "catch" – all that is discarded by people but wanted by Kiran. "For me nothing is junk," she says. "Nothing is wasted. I can sell everything, even broken bottles. I see value in everything," she says.

In spite of a difficult childhood she managed to study and, like most girls, was married off early. Her husband ran a tea stall and she felt they were "always on the footpath". Her father-in-law's brush with junk dealing made her think they had a future in it. She persuaded everyone in the family to change its trade, close the tea stall and run a junk shop. The family did. After facing difficulty for a year, Nidan, an NGO, gave her a loan of Rs. 8,000. She used the money to expand her business. The investment paid off and the family not just survived but did well. She also added a small fleet of rickshaws for renting out.

Kiran's business associates feel proud of the fact that they work for her. She has the reputation of being a fair businessperson and even gives out rickshaws free of cost on Sundays.



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Anita Khushwaha, a beekeeper

Scene two: A litchi orchard littered with wooden boxes in Muzaffarpur's Bochaha block and a few men sitting around. Enter: A girl on a cycle. She parks the cycle under a tree, looks inside the boxes and has a conversation with a few men nearby. Satisfied, she cycles off. Meet Anita Khushwaha, a beekeeper.

Born in a very poor family in Bochaha, Anita learnt early in life that education would help her survive. Anita went to school, taught other children and made a small amount of money. "My parents were not supportive but they listened to me eventually," she says. She once saw boxes and learnt about beekeeping. "I came to know that the queen bee is at the centre of beekeeping. I wanted to buy one. With some persuading, she bought two queen bees. Today, she has 125 queen bees, as many boxes. Anita never discontinued her studies, and even now cycles 14 kilometres everyday to college. She is on her way to becoming a graduate.

Scene 3: A residential girls' school in Gaya district. Enter: A hostel warden who is not many years older than the inmates. Meet Tehseen Bano, who loves her job as the hostel warden at the Kasturba Gandhi Girls School (Balika Vidyalaya). She looks after all the aspects of the girls' lives –their meals, lesson plans and daily lives. Tehseen tells the story of her life. "In our family and the Muslim community, it is rare for girls to get an education." Her circumstances added to her difficulty. Tahseen's father died when she was a baby, and her mother left her brother and Tahseen with her sister so that she could work.

It became clear to Tehseen that only education could help her and the family to break out of the poverty trap. "I wanted to go to school but the family did not support me since none of the other girls went to school," she says. She however insisted, went to school, and started teaching other children in her community to be able to support her own education. Tehseen was the first girl in her community to finish school and to go on to college. Many other girls have followed suit and now study. "It is a struggle for Muslim girls to be able to leave the house to go to school, but we must. That is how we can take care of ourselves."

The girl stars will be part of UNICEF's efforts to inspire parents and girls in the state to let their children go to school, have a career so that they can realise their full potential. "These role models have already inspired many others. Many more will learn from their example as their stories get known," says Mr. Rajbhandari. The girl stars are set to become shining lights for others.

GIRL STARS OF ANDHRA PRADESH AND KARNATAKA – 2006

"The True Heroines" as described by social activist and film actress Amala Annikeni were all smiling on September 23rd, 2006. At a special ceremony they were felicitated for their positive spirit and determination in life. They received a certificate; a special UNICEF bag and cash award (courtesy Mr. L. N. Reddy of Mahabubnagar district, AP)

All present at the ceremony were moved to tears when they heard these girl's stories. Some were school drop outs while others had to face early marriage. Still some were working and studying and one of them had a lost her sister to HIV after being trafficked to Pune. They came from Hyderabad old city, Kadappa, Kurnool, Anantpur, Medak, Prakasham and Raichur districts.

It was clear that their exclusion was exaggerated as a result of their community, caste, economic or social status. But what was also clear was that determination and positive spirit can overcome every obstacle.

To know more about these true heroines, please read on:

1.

Name : Mariam Sultana

Age : 16 years

Occupation : Student of Adolescent learning centres

Resident of : Aljubail Colony, Old city , Hyderabad

Mariam grew up under the care of a single parent since her child hood. Her father married another woman when Mariam was 2 months old and visited home just once to collect his elder daughter Ayesha and then never returned back to the family after that. Mariam's mother Iqbal Begum now 45 years old, worked as a cook initially and eventually shifted her focus towards match making as a Marriage Broker. After Mariam dropped out of 5th standard due to deteriorating financial condition she stayed back at home for more than 2 years before joining the Alternative Learning Centre.

Some month's back her mother completely took to bed due to illness and Mariam was forced to take the mantle of running the family by doing Karchob work. She now gets up at 5 a.m.; does all the household work,

and comes to the centre to complete her studies and computer course. Doing Karchob work in the night has helped her repay most of her debts and she was forced to sell her ear rings to clear them off completely. She is determined to fulfil responsibilities towards and focused on becoming financially stronger person who can face all the hardships and difficulties boldly.

2.

Name : Priyanka

Age : 17 years

Occupation : Student of Velugu residential school, Medak

Resident of : Medak District, AP

Priyanka is the eldest of the 4 daughters of Mr. Ananthi and Ms. Balamani. Her father is a small farmer with a landholding of 3 acres. In addition he has Music band, which performs at marriage functions. Priyanka is a 7th class drop-out, after which she learnt stitching in Ramayampet for 6 months. In order to have a son in the family her parents thought of marrying off 14 year old Priyanka in 2004 to a 22 year old boy in their extended family. Priyanka came to know of her marriage just a week before the event. She protested but was physically forced into obeying.

Although Priyanka knew the boy from childhood, after just 2 months of marriage her husband prohibited her from talking to anyone other than him. If she did talk to any neighbour from either sex she was scolded and beaten. She was divorced after a year of marriage and was sent to her aunt's house in Nizamabad. Determined to study again Priyanka went back to her home and in spite of taunts from her neighbours she was encouraged by the headmaster to clear her Class X examination. Now she is happy that she has overcome the entire trauma and completed her high school. Today both her father and mother are encouraging her to continue her studies and give her moral support.

3.

Name : Saraswathi

Age : 15 years

Occupation : Student of Velugu residential school, Medak

Resident of : Sunnapugutta Thanda of Kadiri Mandal, ST, Anantpur, AP

Saraswathi, a school drop-out, joined Balika Sangha formed by a regional network in April 2006. There she was trained in social issues including education, trafficking and child marriage and also joined school. There she started participating in the network activities through the Kalajatha (street theatre) troop and performed in villages. Now she is continuing her education and during the Kalajatha performances in the villages, she goes to the houses and gathers information about victims of trafficking, drop-out girls, and child marriage cases. She is active in the Balika Sangha, and has been instrumental in enrolling three drop out girls back into school. Saraswathi has also prepared other girls to go for skills trainings.

4.

Name: Nagamani

Age: 15 years

Education: 9th class

Village: Kolukula, Mandal –Yerragondapalem, Prakasham District, AP.

G. Nagamani, a 15 year old girl belongs the scheduled castes community. She stays with her grandmother and a younger brother named Rajesh 10 years old. After her mother died while giving birth to a baby Nagamani's father, a construction labourer, married again and started living in another village. He sends money to his children every month but visits them only once a year. Her father fixed up her marriage and in order to make her earn some money and food sent Nagamani to the folk theatre Kalajatha Programme. There she played the character of Malli- a girl child, a victim of child marriage in the play Mallimogga. Her performance in her own village as Malli influenced her grandmother so much that both Nagamani and her grandmother took a strong decision to postpone the marriage.

5.

Name: K. Mamatha Sreeja

Age: 15 years

Education: 8th class

Village: Gonegandla village, Kurnool District, AP.

Mamatha, a member of Balika Sangam is eldest child of three children of K.Gopal and K.Munneswari, in Producttur town. Both the parents are labourers. Mamatha was studying in a government-aided school, but due to economic problems had to drop out in 8th class and started working. When her father became alcoholic he physically beat the mother and kids often. One day after a particularly violent fight, he threw the mother and children out of the house and they went to their grandparent's house in Gonegandla village. There the Mamatha and her mother worked as agricultural labourers to educate the other two kids. Community workers talked to Mamatha and found out that she was very much interested in studies as well as vocational courses. They motivated her grandfather and her mother and convinced them to enrol her in the Residential Bridge School. From the RBC she was sent for an exposure visit to study the vocational skills at Krishi Vignana Kendram, Medak and Janasikshana Samstan at Hyderabad. Now she is learning tailoring in a dress making course and is confident that she will become self sufficient and also help her mother and siblings in the future.

6.

Name: Pinjari Bade bi

Age: 16 years

Education: 10th class

Village: Kulumala Village of Gonegandla Mandal of Kurnool district, AP.

Pinjari Bade bi is a girl from the minority Muslim community and plays an active role in Indira Gandhi Balika Sanga – a girl's movement. The youngest of five girls and one boy she was only 16 years old when her parents P. Pedda Kasimanna and P. Dastagiramma started preparations to get her married. But Bade bi was not at all interested to get married and shared her opinion with the community volunteer and asked for their help. The community volunteer approached her parents and counselled them by explaining the disadvantages of early marriage and succeeded in convincing the parents and got the marriage postponed. Bade bi was brought to the Bridge Course Camp and since then she has become aware of various vocational skills available for them like horticulture, modern agricultural techniques, vegetable cultivation, cell phone repair, fashion designing, beautician courses, computer courses etc. She wants to pursue a vocation and is determined to become a role model to all the other girls.

7.

Name: M.Shanthi

Age: 18 years

Education: 10th class, ST. Residential Hostel.

Village: Peddabidiki Village in Sambepalli Mandal ,Kadappa District, AP.

Six years back after the death of her mother Shanthi started living with her grandfather as her father too had left them and married a second time. Meanwhile Shanthi's illiterate sister was sent to Pune to work. The entire family was dependent on Shanthi's sister's income, but the girl was sent back to her home after 3 years when she tested positive for HIV. On arrival at her village Shanthi's sister was driven away from home by her brothers and other family members. Shanthi's sister was given shelter by her grand father. Meanwhile the health condition of Shanthi's sister deteriorated and Shanthi had to stop her education in the middle and return to the village to look after her sister. Shanthi faced a lot of mental agony and trauma since she along with her grandfather was the only ones who looked after the girl. After fighting for her life for more than one year, Shanthi's sister died.

The entire episode left a deep impression on Shanthi. Seeing her sister's tragedy before her own eyes she was determined to join forces with anti-trafficking activities. A Regional Network movement provided an opportunity for Shanthi to express herself and get involved. Shanthi is presently one of the vocal voices championing for girls rights and dignity. She has involved herself and taken a lead in the formation of first the Balika Sangha (Girls' Union) in Peddabidiki Village which paved the way for the formation of 36 Balika Sanghas in Kadapa District. Joining the Kalajatha Team, Shanthi is in the forefront in using street theatre techniques to spread awareness in other villages. Shanthi counselled a girl about to be sent to Pune and successfully convinced the girl to stay back in the village. Today Shanthi is one of the torch bearers of the Regional Network activities.

TEHSEEN BANO, GIRLS' HOSTEL WARDEN



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Tehseen Bano, Girls' Hostel Warden

'In our hearts all girls long to be known, to be respected, to have their own identity, but girls often say to themselves, "What choices do we have?" I have learned one thing, if you are educated, there are many, many choices in front of you, you do not have to follow, you can create your own road, then others will follow you.'

Tehseen works as a girls' hostel warden in Kasturba Gandhi Girls School (Balika Vidyalaya) in Guruwa, Gaya district, Bihar. Tehseen looks after as many as 70 girls who have come to stay at the hostel to be able to complete their education. Parents leave their daughters in Tehseen's care, knowing that they will be safe, healthy and learn as much as they can. Her father died when she was just seven months old and her mother worked in other people's houses unable to make ends meet. Tehseen and her brother moved in with their relatives who did not support her to go to school. Tehseen taught other children to pay for her own education and persuaded her relatives, everyday, to let her go to school – and then college. But this was not enough, Tehseen knew she wanted other girls to go to school and so she approached Mahila Samakya for the position of a hostel warden where she is today. Tehseen grew up in Mohalla Purab Sarai, Gaya, Bihar. Tehseen is 24 years old.

LALITA, KARATE TEACHER



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Lalita in action

Lalita, a tenacious young woman who has overcome great barriers because of her place as a female in the lowest caste in India, teaches a karate class to other young girls at Mahila Shikshan Kendra, a Women's Education Center, in the block of Amos which is a cluster of villages located near the city of Patna in Bihar, India July 12, 2003. Bihar is the poorest state in India and women suffer greatly because of the poverty, lack of education and opportunities.



© UNICEF/India/ Ami Vitale

Lalita, karate teacher

Most of the girls who are attending the eight month course have had to overcome tremendous resistance from families and a society entrenched in the weight of a caste system which discourages those from the lower castes to be educated, especially women. The centers are being funded by the World Bank although it was initially started by UNICEF .

SANDHYA SHERRING, COMPUTER TRAINER



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Sandhya Sherring, computer trainer

'Education is the foundation that makes you a strong pillar. Just the way a building cannot stand if the foundation is not firm, without education your building will fall. You can do anything – anything at all – if you are educated.'

Sandhya Sherring is a computer trainer and she owns her own computer institute where she teaches children about computers. Sandhya dropped out of school when her father lost her job; Sandhya's father opened a small framing shop using her mother's sari as a make-shift roof.

Sandhya was very sad to drop out of school, and soon Sandhya's mother took a job as a teacher to ensure that Sandhya and her brother could complete their education. When Sandhya finished school she looked for a job in Jhansi because life was still hard for her family.

Although Sandhya searched, she found no opportunities and so one day Sandhya boarded a train in search of a better life – her aunt lived in Delhi, and so Sandhya thought life would be better there.

When Sandhya arrived and started looking for a job, everywhere she went people asked her if she had computer skills, she did not. And although she was very disappointed not to be able to find a job, her disappointment did give her an idea.

She returned home and enrolled in a computer institute, and she learned so fast that soon she began to teach other young people about computers. Her success gave her another idea, she would take a loan and open her own institute.

And that is just what Sandhya did. Sandhya's computer institute is in the same town in which she grew up, and once upon a time, where she thought there were no jobs to be found. Sandhya lives in Babina Village, a cantonment area in Jhansi district and she is 23 years old.

MADHURI KUMARI, VILLAGE LEADER



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Madhuri Kumari, Village Leader

'I know what it is like when you want to study and can't – when I was young only the boys in my village were allowed to go to school. When I finally convinced my father that I wanted to go too, I was the only girl in a class of 26 boys. Education teaches you to read beyond the letters and the words – if you cannot read between the lines, then what's the point of studying?'

Madhuri Kumari is a village 'Pradhan', an elected village leader in Fakirpuri village, Bahraich District, Uttar Pradesh. Madhuri struggled to go to school when she was young; she was the only girl in a class of 26 boys. Madhuri used to walk six kilometers to school by herself, through the thick forest.

As Madhuri grew, she knew she wanted to stay in school though her father constantly opposed her, so she did odd jobs for her neighbours to be able to pay for her school supplies.

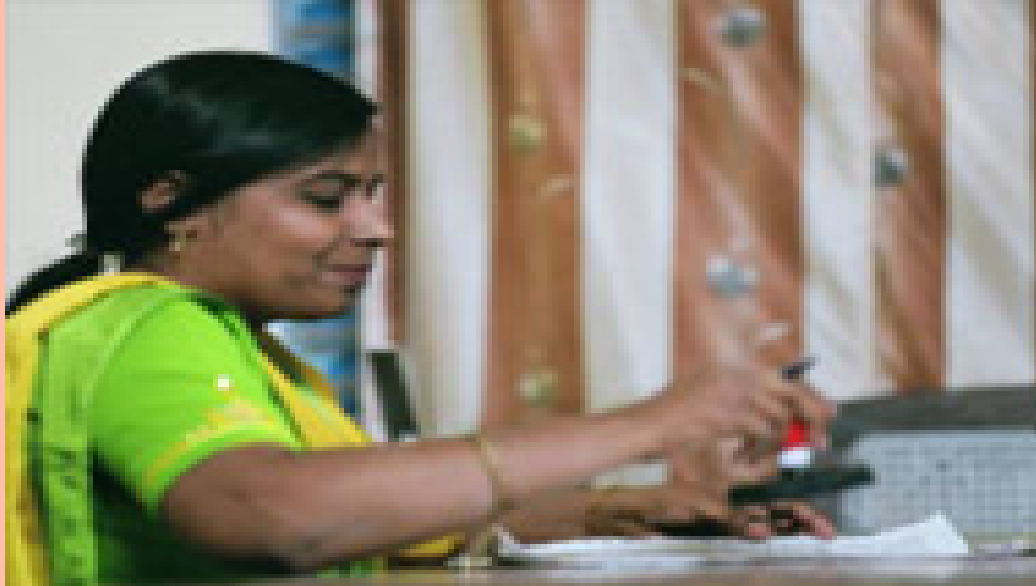
Soon, with the money she saved, she opened a small grocery shop. Everyone in the village knew who Madhuri was, they knew she had struggled to go to school, that with a small shop she had managed to save enough money to build her own house – and she was so helpful to everyone that people soon asked her to be their leader.

When Madhuri stood for elections, she won and she was only 21 years old.

For the past six years, Madhuri has been busy building roads, installing a drainage system in the village, adding new classrooms to the Government School and encouraging children to go to school in her village. If families cannot afford to send their children to school, then Madhuri quietly pays for their supplies.

Madhuri is well respected in her village, today, she is 27 years old.

SHABNAM AARA, SMALL LOANS MANAGER



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Shabnam Aara, Small Loans Manager

'You should go to school so that when you grow up you can be self-reliant. Even if others do not support you, you cannot give up. You will have to struggle a lot – you may have to balance your home, your work and your school. This may seem unfair. But sometimes, this is the only way. Dreams are left unfulfilled if you are dependent. Independence comes from being educated.'

Shabnam Aara is a small loans manager in Cashpor a micro-finance organization in Benares, Uttar Pradesh. When Shabnam was young, she dropped out of school when her father lost his job, but she managed to go back to school and complete her education by working part-time. Shabnam learned how to make carpets at home, and managed to enroll herself back in school. Shabnam then heard about the position as a field worker with Cashpor, the organization was looking for women fieldworkers as their clients are also women. Shabnam was able to convince many women to take loans and change their lives. During this time, Shabnam was promoted three times – and each time Shabnam wanted more, so she studied at night for her B.A. by correspondence – and today, Shabnam has been promoted to be the branch manager of Cashpor, where she oversees an office of seven men. Shabnam lives in a small room with a small suitcase behind her office, saving to build a house for her family. Shabnam grew up in Arhora Village, Sonbhadra district, Uttar Pradesh and she is 26 years old.

KIRAN DEVI, JUNKYARD DEALER



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Kiran Devi, Junkyard Dealer

'You find diamonds in the dirtiest places – and let me tell you this – no work is dirty work, with my junkyard I have created a business that has changed my family's life – unlike me – my children will go to school. My business has changed the opportunities of the present and future generations of my family.'

Kiran Devi is a junkyard dealer and serial entrepreneur; Kiran lives in Patna, Bihar.

Kiran took a small loan to open her junkyard where she lives. Two roads cross in the center of the city of Patna and you will find Kiran somewhere in between.

Kiran thought she could run a junkyard because of where she lived and she knew she wanted to do something to make the future better for her children. With the help of her family and what she had learned in school (Kiran had always been good at maths), Kiran thought she could make a family business. And Kiran has done just that. With a loan from Nidaan, a micro credit organization, she bought a fleet of rickshaws and hired nine men to work for her.

. And Kiran is not done yet, in the time she has left, she sells saris and cow-dung cakes as cooking fuel.

Now Kiran's children go to school, and they are healthy, her husband is a driver and supports what she does, but Kiran, and her partner in business, her mother-in-law support the entire family. Kiran grew up in Bapunagar village, Patna District, Bihar. Kiran is 24 years old.

ANITA KHUSHWAHA, BEEKEEPER



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Anita Khushwaha, Beekeeper

'I ride a bicycle to go to college, I learned how to ride a motorcycle too – in secret. I am the first woman beekeeper in my state. I always do what I want and what makes me happy, and when no one helps me I find my own way. I have learned that it is never easy for a girl to do something new, people say bad things about her. A lot of people, including my own family, were upset with me at first, but today because I am successful, they respect me, they listen to me. I like beekeeping; I can run a business, earn money and study at the same time. I like being happy, if I did not go to school I would not be happy.'

Anita Khushwaha is a beekeeper in Bochaha village, Muzzafarpur district, Bihar.

When Anita was young her parents did not want her to go to school, they asked Anita to look after the goats instead of going to school.

But then one day, Anita snuck into school and spent the day there unnoticed – she loved school so much that she convinced her parents to let her stay in school.

Anita's father agreed to let her study until Grade 5 – but Anita wanted to study further, so she began to teach other children what she knew and earned enough money from her teaching to pay for her school books and fees.

Soon Anita knew she had to do something more – she wanted to go to college – but she needed to find a way to fund her education.

Men in Anita's village had always kept bees and made honey. Anita was the first young woman to give bee keeping a try – she saved enough money from teaching other children to buy two queen bees and begin her bee-keeping business.

Today, Anita has over 100 boxes of bees; she makes her own honey, goes to college on her bicycle and is still only 17 years old.

BHAURI MALAVAT, POLICE CONSTABLE



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Bhauri Malavat, Police Constable

'Education helps you to see what is wrong in the world and the confidence to question it.'

Bhauri Malavat is a police constable in Bikaner District, Rajasthan.

Bhauri was married when she was a child, but still went to school. Bhauri's father was a teacher and he wanted to make sure that Bhauri completed her education.

Bhauri belongs to the Saansi community and she felt they were always treated differently because of their caste: Bhauri grew up having to collect water from a separate well.

Although Bhauri failed one year of school, and repeated her school year, she persisted and one day at school she heard about the famous Indian policewoman called Kiran Bedi.

Bhauri thought she would like to be a police officer too – she thought in this way, she could begin to change the world.

Bhura Ram, Bhauri's husband, dropped out of school when he was young, and unable to find work, he stays at home to look after their daughter.

Bhauri is 24 years old.

ANURADHA RATHORE, MEDICAL STUDENT



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Anuradha Rathore, Medical Student

'When you go to school and do well, the world forgets what you cannot do and starts seeing what you can.'

Anuradha Rathore is studying medicine in Jodhpur Medical College, Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

When Anu was young she contracted Polio – and although it affected the way she walks it has not slowed Anu down in any other way.

Anu has studied very hard and won a place at medical college under a reservation for students with physical disabilities.

Anu failed once at school and she still finds college challenging, but she wants to be a doctor so she can prevent other children from contracting Polio.

She wants to open a medical center in her village where the medical treatment is free of cost, and everyone has to wait in line, where no one, unless it is an emergency, can jump the queue.

Anu is from Jaipur, Rajasthan and she is 19 years old.

DURGA BAI, HEALTHWORKER



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Durga Bai, Healthworker

'I can never sit still, I always wanted to see new places, do new things, and learn new skills. So many of us are restless, especially women because we are enclosed in boundaries. When a woman goes to school these boundaries begin to fade. Education helps you build the world you want to live in.'

Durga Bai is a health worker with Aarth in the tribal belt of Udaipur District, Rajasthan. Durga travels by herself, by bus, to 22 villages every month, Durga talks to 2,000 women about how to improve their health and the health of their children.

Durga's days are long and she walks many kilometers, she carries her black back strung across her forehead.

In the villages Durga visits, women are not educated and many girls do not go to school. Durga explains health concepts in local dialects, simply, ensuring that as many children as she meets are vaccinated, visit medical centers and go to school.

When Durga was young, she did not go to school, but she heard that lunch was free at school, so one day she enrolled herself in school and stayed there until she was married at the age of 13.

Durga is upset that she did not finish her education and she makes sure that her daughter and son go to school everyday.

Durga's husband Kalu Ram is a truck driver and what Durga tells women in villages, he tells his truck driving friends. Durga is 27 years old.

KRISHNA BAGEL, GOVERNMENT PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER



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Krishna Bagel, Government Primary School Teacher

'Education gives you the power of expression – it gives you the confidence to tell people what you feel. If you are educated you can grow better crops, you know what to plant when and when to harvest, you send your children to school and you have a fighting chance in the world. Your education can help you prove that anything is possible.'

Krishna Bagel is a primary school teacher in a Government School in Tikaria Village, Mandla District, Madhya Pradesh. Krishna was the only girl in her village to complete her grade 12 education; all the other girls of her age dropped out of school because the secondary school was too far away to walk to – it was in another town.

Krishna's father is a Forest Ranger, he dropped out of school when he was in grade seven and he knew how hard it was to get a job without an education; he promised himself that all of his children would complete their education.

Krishna grew up knowing she had a lot to prove, and so she volunteered as night school teacher in a Government program to educate adults. Krishna did this job so well, that when the position for the teacher in her local village became available, Krishna, the only one to have completed her grade 12 education, was offered the job.

Krishna is 25 years old.

ROOPALI JAIN 'RUBY', BEAUTY PARLOUR OWNER



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Roopali Jain 'Ruby', Beauty Parlour Owner

'If there is a tragedy in your life, education gives you the ability to deal with the challenge and change your life – in my case the two converged – I opened a beauty parlour because I had the talent and education to do so, my father died, and it was then that I knew I had to take care of my family, and I could, because I had been to school.'

Roopali Jain 'Ruby' owns a beauty parlour in Guna, Madhya Pradesh. Ruby was able to open her own beauty parlour in her grandmother's house because she took a loan from a bank – the bank gave Ruby a loan because she had completed her education to grade 12 with good marks.

Ruby decided to open her own parlour when her father died, because there was no one else who could look after her family.

Ruby, who had always been artistic, decided to study in a parlour to become a beautician and at the same time she studied late into the night to complete grade 12 and then her college degree by correspondence.

Today, Ruby has her own beauty parlour and people come from far away to visit Ruby's parlour because they say, 'she has magic in her hands'. Ruby is 26 years old.

PREMLATA VERMA, ACCOUNTANT



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Premlata Verma, Accountant

'My grandmother knew she wanted me to study, she knew my education would take me very far, she was right, look where I have reached. When I was young I used to collect water for other people, today I have running water in my house, a scooter to take me to work and job in a Government office.'

Premlata Verma is an accountant in the office of the Superintendent of Police in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh. Premlata is the supervisor of her section and oversees the work of four people – though she is the youngest employee in her section.

Premlata's grandmother raised her and her sister when they were young, because her grandfather did not want the girls to stay in school.

Premlata's grandmother was adamant that her granddaughters would go to school because she knew how hard it was to go through life without an education – Premlata's grandmother had never been to school.

When Premlata was young, she carried water for her neighbors to earn extra money to pay for her school supplies, today, she has running water in her home, a Government job and a Bachelors of Commerce degree.

Premlata lives in Jhabua and she is 28 years old.

http://www.unicef.org/india/media_2676.htm

LAXMIRANI MAJHI, ARCHER



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Laxmirani Majhi, Archer

'Education has made who I am today - it was only because I went to school that I got a chance to be selected to train as an archer. Now I compete internationally and travel the world – school gave me this, I thank my parents for sending me to school.'

Laxmirani Majhi is an archer who competes in international level competitions for India. When Laxmi was young, her family knew the most important thing was for Laxmi to go to school; many girls in Laxmi's village did not go to school.

Now, while completing her education, Laxmi has won so many archery competitions and has been awarded the position of a cadet by the Tata Sports Academy, in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand.

Laxmi's first chance to become an archer was offered to her when the selectors for the archery academy visited her Government School.

Laxmi is from the Santhal tribe; she grew up in Bagula village, Ghatshila district in Jharkhand and she is 17 years old.

SURYAMANI BHAGAT, FOREST ACTIVIST



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Suryamani Bhagat, Forest Activist

'Education not only helps you to create your own employment, it can also help millions of people to begin to understand their environment and what we need to do to live peacefully with nature.'

Suryamani Bhagat is an activist with 'Save the forests of Jharkhand movement'; she is the founder of 'Torang' a tribal rights and cultural center in Kotari Village, Ranchi district in Jharkhand. Suryamani works to save the forest where she lives and preserve her tribal culture with her community. When Suryamani was young, her father lost his job and Suryamani had to drop out of school – during this difficult time her family did not have enough to eat but they found a friend in a kind, shop-keeper in her village that helped them with food without expecting anything in return. When Suryamani went back to school, she realized that she loved to learn about the forests and also remembering the kind man in her community – decided to work to preserve the forests and their community's culture. Suryamani has a BA in Sanskrit and she is 26 years old

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