



SOAR ABOVE THE SKY

PART II

Social and Development Research and Action Group (SADRAG) is a not-for-profit organisation working since 2007.

The organisation builds Inclusive Communities through Education, Protection and Livelihood, with the vision of creating the world of Equality where all have equal opportunities for social, economic and community participation. The organisation has qualitatively transformed the life of underprivileged segment of population and has built their capacity for sustaining the change.

The first Coffee Table Book, *Soar above the Sky*, came up in the year 2019. It was dedicated to migrant youth in the changing landscape of India where life of youth from underserved communities, is transforming through an opportunity in Skilling and Learning.

This is the second iteration of "*Soar above the Sky*," an opulent testament to stories replete with resilience and fervor that SADRAG has empowered to radiate with brilliance. These narratives are emblematic of migrant women, children, and youth who defied conventional stereotypes, dismantled restrictive barriers, and forged ahead to manifest their aspirations. What sets these individuals apart is their audacity to seize opportunities, thereby effecting positive transformations in their lives.

Each story of this book beckon us to comprehend the profound impact that unfettered access to opportunities can wield in catalyzing transformative change. Each narrative serves as a poignant reminder that when individuals dare to embrace chance and proactively work towards improving their lives, dreams cease to be elusive fancies; instead, they crystallize into the tangible reality of lived experiences.

SADRAG
March 2024

Stories of Aspirations & Dreams Come Alive!



Preface

India is the country of 1.42 billion people. Known for hard work and loyalty, our people can do wonders if they have an access to opportunities of learning and growth. We believe that formal education and training are the two key areas that can build an individual's capacity to change the fate of his or her life. For the last 20 years, SADRAG, following the principle of Equality of All, has been building the capacities of youth, women and children, unmindful of existing divides across caste, class, gender, religion and geographies within the country.

To highlight the struggles and successes of invisible youth in the country, we had published *Soar above the Sky*, our first Coffee table book in the year 2019. As the name suggests, the book was a compilation of challenges, constraints and hurdles faced by contemporary youth in their everyday life. However, the book had a silver lining. It showcased youth's personal initiatives, efforts and commitment to get over these limitations and make their life better. They diligently followed the path shown to them by the organization. It helped them not only to upskill but also choose viable livelihood options and contribute to their family income.

As SADRAG moves in its 20th year of social impact and social transformation, we present part 2 of *Soar above the Sky: The Stories of change* that reflect individual grit and commitment to charter the path of growth despite their family's and systemic hurdles.

These are the stories of 10 individuals who left their native places and moved to urban Noida in search of a better life. Most of them are migrants who were forced to leave their homes in rural areas due to dearth of work and employment opportunities there. These heartwarming stories highlight the physical and emotional struggles that affect people who migrate from rural to urban spaces in search of a stable income. Lacking in skills and training, they are unable to fetch jobs that require some prior practical experience. Many of them keep shuttling between their native places and the new city.

Sarthak - SADRAG's umbrella program of learning and growth, provides migrant women and youth training in skill sets that can fetch them relevant work opportunities and give them a sense of purpose in the new city. Once they decide to take the required training, they quickly become competent of jobs that make their survival possible in developed cities like Noida. Interestingly, many of them have risen above survival mode and are leading far more comfortable lives in terms of resources and lifestyle. These youth were made ready to pursue higher goals in life with the organization taking utmost care of their formative needs. Some of them have become a source of inspiration to other people who might be their classmates, colleagues and even family members who once doubted their potential. These are stories of young migrant girls and boys who needed opportunities to learn, but could not afford to avail the available learning options due to lack of resources at home. They not only gained the required skills but also the confidence to use the skills for economic gain and move on to the path of a sustainable career.

These are also the stories of children who took the brunt of parent's migration and stayed out of the realm of formal schooling. They were enabled to not only take the first step of joining a school but also to have dreams beyond survival.

These are the stories of those women who live in rural communities of Western U.P. and have shed their ghoonghat to become economically independent. Some of them have assumed the roles of community leaders. These women who once wore ghoonghat (customary veil for women after marriage) on their heads and were restricted to the four walls of their household joined our hands, and marched towards economic and social empowerment. These women learnt the ropes of skilling, marketing, management of micro-enterprises and money management to become self-capable and independent.

Soar above the Sky presents the tip of the millions of lives who struggle in everyday life, grab the opportunity when it knocks at their door and turn it in their favour. We wish them all the best for their journey ahead and also to all those who are still in the process of transforming their lives.

Dr Mala Bhandari
SADRAG
March 2024

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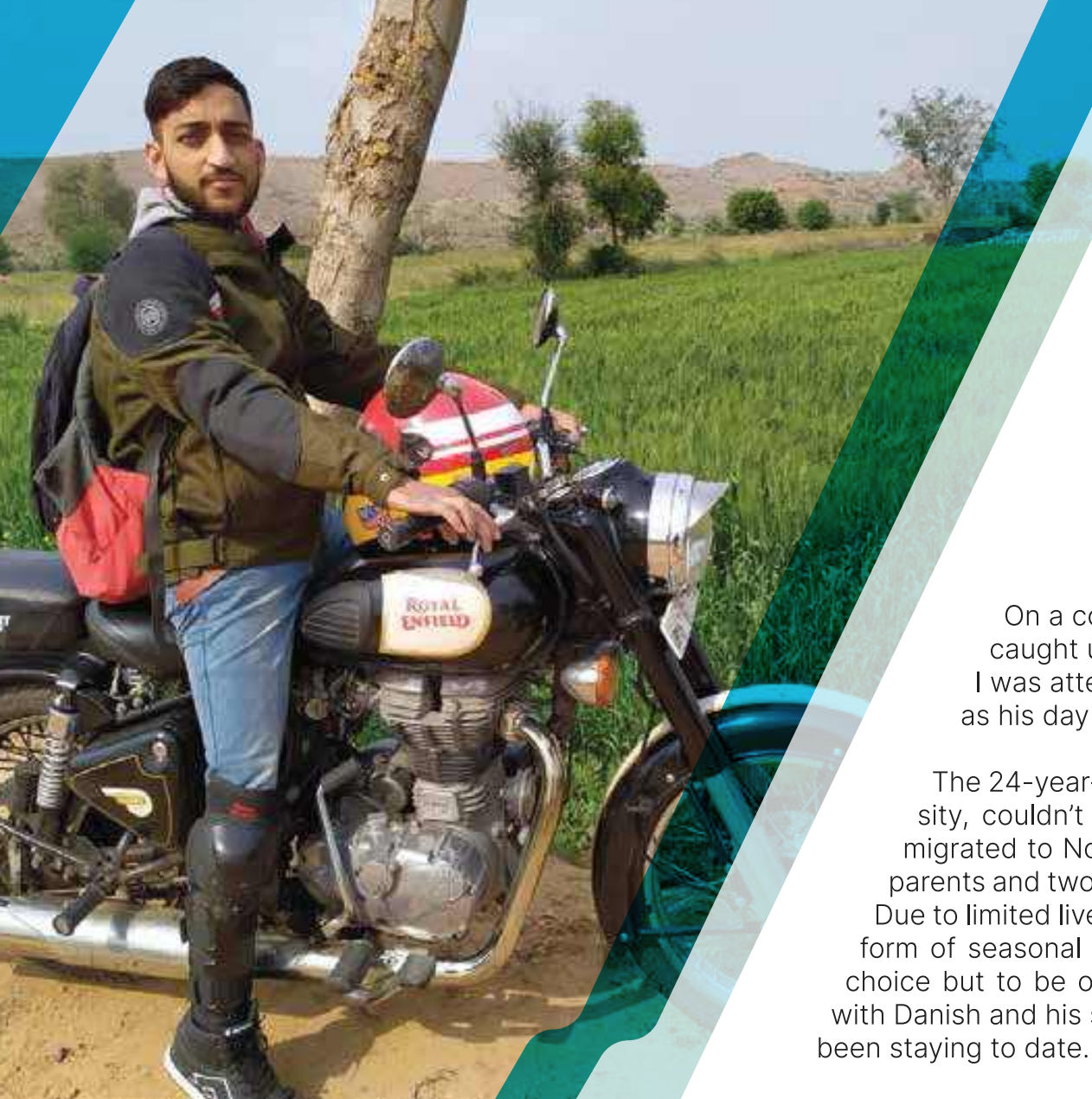


Image: A 24-year-old Danish on one of his official tours with Royal Enfield

Danish Khan

A testimony to the power of learning



My family was born in poverty but now we might get to enjoy some comfort!



On a cold January morning, a crisp, flowy and effortless voice caught us unattended as Danish picked up the call saying “Sorry. I was attending a meeting.” The young man keeps a tight schedule as his day shuttles between work and study.

The 24-year-old Danish, who today is pursuing an MBA from Delhi University, couldn't have imagined obtaining higher education when his family migrated to Noida in 2008 in the face of financial challenges. His family of parents and two younger sisters have their roots in the Purnia district of Bihar. Due to limited livelihood opportunities in the village that often presented in the form of seasonal employment or restrictive farming, Danish's parents had no choice but to be on the lookout for something better. Eventually, they moved with Danish and his sisters to Nithari village in Noida (Sector 31) where they have been staying to date.

On reaching Noida, Danish's family found a one-room house as their place of residence. The family couldn't afford a bigger place due to the limited resources they had carried with them. They were expected to pay an amount of rupees 3,500 as rent which was the first pressing expense that the family had to bear in the new city.

As his family firmed their roots in the new land, Danish's father took up the job of delivering metal parts on a rickshaw and his mother started to work as a house helper. With his father earning a daily wage of rupees 500 on average and his mother earning rupees 8,000 a month, the average monthly household income hit close to rupees 21,000. The sum helped the family sustain a livelihood but fell short of providing Danish with formal primary education.

After a time of things not looking up, there came a day when a choice had to be made. An affable neighbour woman broke into his house, telling his mother about a community centre in the vicinity which was providing foundational learning to underprivileged students and offered the potential of getting them enrolled in standard schools. Without a thought, Danish took up the opportunity and promptly headed to the community centre to get himself registered. The doors of learning opened to him for the very first time.

When Danish found himself in the community centre supported by SADRAG, two prominent teaching figures influenced his impressionable mind. He fondly remembers Pradeep Bhaiya and Sanju mam, who first taught him how to grip hold of a pencil. At this stage in his learning journey, Danish fumbled with basics. He had no idea how to end a sentence and begin another. Commas, full stops and writing within the grid were a mystery to him. It made sense to the family how important a role this centre was playing in creating a transition to a better school for which he wasn't ready yet.



It wasn't a school-like thing but more like a preparatory platform that did make us ready for school. Had this transition wasn't there, I would have been a disaster at the school.

.....Danish



Soon it was time for Danish to appear for the entrance exam that could get him enrolled in a formal school. The facilitators at SADRAG saw a sparkle in Danish's eyes and a mind that could do wonders if guided. He was enrolled under Vidya Ratna: The school sponsorship program initiated by the organization. Danish was admitted to a renowned private school, the Noida Public Senior Secondary School, sector 23, Noida in Class 2.

He was roughly around 11 or 12 when he entered the reputed school. All his classmates were way younger than him. It took him a year to settle in. He had no idea how a city school would work. From walking in at any time in my school back in the village to adhering to strict timetables in the current environment, there was a lot to adjust and understand. After a year passed, he became unstoppable and earned the reputation of being a consistent rank holder throughout his school life.

A major chunk of his school education expenses was taken up by SADRAG which included school fees, books and uniforms. Even small useful things like a geometry box were handed over to him for free. Danish felt grateful for knowing how for more than 12 years, SADRAG stood by his dreams as a consistent support and saw the potential which he couldn't see in himself.

After having good formative years, it was in higher secondary class that Danish discovered his interest in business studies. Despite not being good in Mathematics, Danish took it up alongside other subjects as the quick-witted young man understood that to make sense of the economy or money in general, one must be good at numbers.

It was in class 8 when Danish realized that as he was growing fast into his teens, he needed some pocket money. Seeing his parents fulfilling the basic needs of the family and supporting his sisters' education on a limited income, Danish didn't have the heart to bring up the topic at home. Being good at studies, Danish found a temporary source of income by taking private tuition at home. He started to teach students in the neighbourhood, charging rupees 300-400 for a month.

At this point in his life, Danish developed a habit of saving some money every month. The young man started to keep aside rupees 200-300 as savings. Nobody in the family knew about the amount the young man was secretly saving for the future.

“

Whatever I am today, I owe a huge part of it to this organisation. I often think how different my life would have been if SADRAG had not crossed my path

.....Danish

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Life after intermediate

By the time Danish was in class 12, he was able to earn a monthly sum of rupees 3,500 through tuition alone and was able to save more. Danish graduated from class 12 in the year 2019. Little had he known that the year would take a dramatic turn for his family. His family was hit by a financial crisis and found itself in a helpless situation with a heavy debt hanging over its head. The year unpredictably tested Danish. It was the year when his journey with SADRAG reached its maturation. The organisation, much like a mother bird had taught him to fly. Having developed wings, the time had come for Danish to take the solo flight.

The young man found himself at a crossroads where he had to choose between higher education and financially supporting his family to relieve them of the debt they were caught in. Not willing to let go of learning, Danish wanted a middle road where he could find a way to both study and work. He started filling up forms for B.Com in desired colleges while side-eyeing for jobs at the same time. Difficulties began to soar high when Danish's percentile in class 12 wasn't good enough to help him secure a seat in his desired institutes like Jamia Millia Islamia, a central university in New Delhi. There was no other option but to settle with the opportunities he was getting at that moment.

Eventually, the young man found a college that offered him the opportunity for distance learning and decided to take it up. Danish made up his mind to pursue B.Com from the School of Open Learning which was affiliated with Delhi University. Danish was expected to pay rupees 20,000 as his fee for the first year. Finding his family amid a financial challenge, Danish again decided to show up for himself. He started taking up small jobs that could get him quick money like doing errands in big events. These jobs included pamphlet distribution, making calls for clients and getting involved in other promotional activities.

Knowing this time he would need some external help to pay the major chunk of the fee, Danish approached another community organisation that was able to provide him with a sum of rupees 7,000 as initial support. By this time, Danish's savings jackpot had grown considerably. He was able to find rupees 10,000 in his savings alone. Adding the organisation's money to his savings, he successfully made his way to the college.

Key to the new job

As the door of higher learning opened to him, other opportunities to make money started to knock at his doorstep. One day while Danish's mother was sharing her family concerns with one of her employers, the latter told her about a job opportunity that was being offered by Shri Mahadev Agency which holds a franchise in the reputed automobile company the Royal Enfield.

Danish's mother was unknowingly the key to his first job. She encouraged him to take up the interview. Danish was convinced to appear for the interview that was to follow. While Danish lacked the technical skills usually required for the job being offered, his engaging conversational style and quick wit made him a competent candidate for fieldwork. His impressionable personality made him an easy selection. He earned a job that could pay him a monthly salary of rupees 10,000.

With his education and job situation coming into place, Danish's next concern was to repay the debt that was making his father nervous and his family dull. He decided to give away his entire salary as a re-payment for a year and bank on his savings for monthly expenses. As the challenging year passed him like a setting sun, Danish was able to see his obstacles in learning, job and debt dissolving in front of his eyes.

The year 2020 came with a promising start. He received a bike as a gift from his mother's brother who saw Danish as a capable young man who should be rewarded for his resilience and determination. Having a bike parked at home made it easy to commute within the city and cut off transportation expenses. It also helped him reach work on time.

Interestingly, as Danish befriended a helpful client at work, he was exposed to the world of investment for the first time. The client encouraged him to invest in mutual funds and explained to him the importance of passive income. Danish took the lessons in all seriousness and months after started to invest in the same.

Having a vision for his future, Danish knew that the next step was to fetch a professional degree. It was clear to him that he would be pursuing an MBA from the same college while he continued to work for the agency. However, he knew that, unlike the undergraduate course, a professional course would demand more funds. The investments he had started to make would come in handy then, he knew. In 2023, having graduated from his B.Com class, Danish got enrolled for an MBA. As his investments were all ripe, Danish was able to pay rupees 90,000 out of 1 lakh on his own as his fees for the master's class.

Today Danish is pursuing an MBA alongside his job at the Royal Enfield's agency. His salary saw a hike of rupees 10,000 and the young man today pockets rupees 20,000 as his monthly salary.

Danish comes from a background where life is spent in an attempt to meet ends. With the power of knowledge, he holds a corporate job and is the first in his family to think beyond survival. His small house of one room has grown into two bedrooms, two washrooms and a standalone kitchen. He who always wished to wear quality clothing has started to shop online from reputed brands like Decathlon. He treats himself to fashionable jackets once in a while. Unlike his forefathers, Danish enjoys travelling as a hobby. The desire in him to explore more places has been fanned by his touring experiences with Royal Enfield. He plans to take his family on vacations more often.

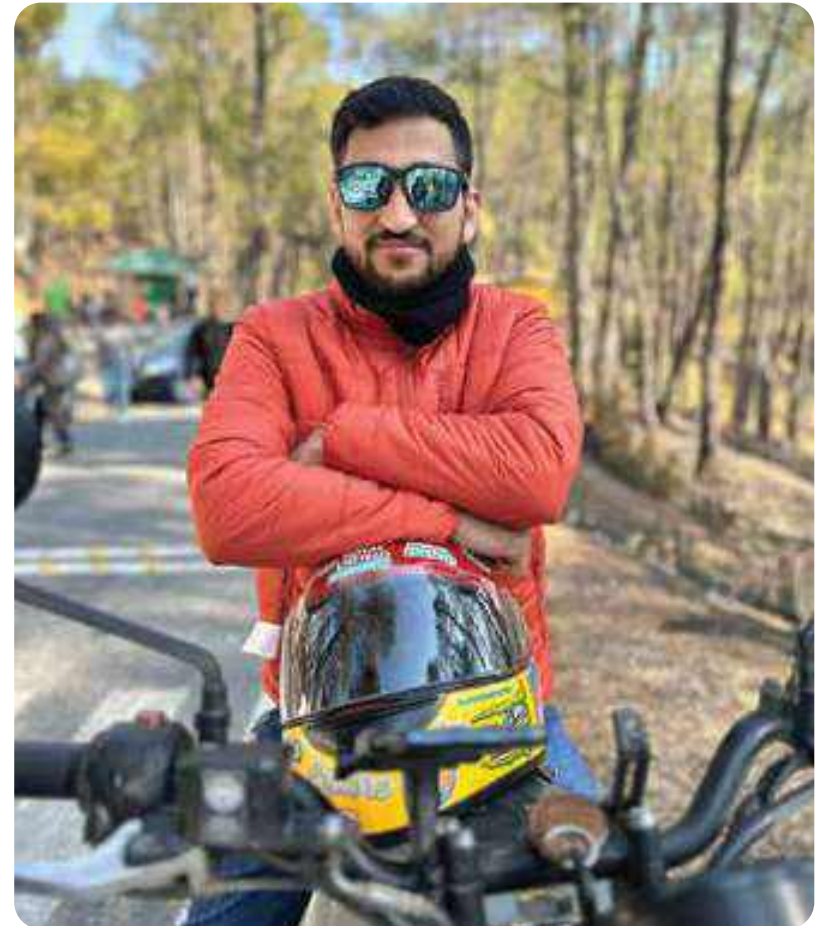
One important testimony of his family's improved circumstances is a noticeable shift in the healthcare quality. From being able to afford only government hospitals in the past, Danish's family have found accessibility to private and quality health care. Recently, when Danish's father was diagnosed with Diabetes, the young man without any hesitation took him to an Apollo consultant.

One important testimony of his family's improved circumstances is a noticeable shift in the healthcare quality. From being able to afford only government hospitals in the past, Danish's family have found accessibility to private and quality health care. Recently, when Danish's father was diagnosed with Diabetes, the young man without any hesitation took him to an Apollo consultant. With his admirable conversational skills, Danish was quick to climb up the corporate ladder. He now works as a community rights manager in the agency. He often engages in planning tours for high-profile clients and relays networking efficiently.

Being an easy conversationalist, Danish has a way of befriending all his clients. He often encourages them to tour along with him and makes them meet and interact with one another. Among the clients that he caters to are lawyers, doctors, businessmen and other educated minds. Danish not only memorize each of their personalities but also make them talk on a common topic. He continues to learn from these people who have more experience with learning than him.

Danish never took his schooling for granted and thereby he has a firm foot in understanding fundamental concepts. He can now read through balance sheets, understand statistical principles and thereby understand the science of finances. He engages in reading routinely and has been an audience to some great books like **Psychology of Money** and **Rich Dad Poor Dad**.

“
Having developed an analytical mind,
I can bind my clients in creative ways.
.....Danish
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With the power of learning, I am no longer dependent on others for survival. My family was born into poverty but hopefully, we might die in comfort. From making money at the end of your life to making money work for you, I have seen two different worlds and what joins them is a delicate rope of learning

.....Danish

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The young independent mind is now taking over the cost of his sisters' education who are in the first year of the BA program and encourages them to take learning as seriously as any other social obligations. He is all sports when it comes to supporting their dreams. While one of his sisters aims for civil examinations, the other has plans to become a Hindi teacher.

Danish Khan seems to have grown into everything contrary to what one might imagine him to be knowing his struggles with poverty and hardships in life. A fluent speaker, an engaging conversationalist, a progressive thinker and an advocate of gender equality. He owes it all to the power of learning.

His ability to act quickly on opportunities and his unquenchable thirst to learn more are pushing him through all the struggles of life. From having been able to give this great mind a hand in need to getting inspired from his life.

We at SADRAG wish him luck in all his future endeavours!



The power of education can be experienced when a humble village boy wears a corporate suit and visions to rock the stock market. Danish who has been acing his current job has planned out his career trajectory by laying out pragmatic and calculative steps.

For more technical learning, he aims to register for courses that teach him the necessary skills. To broaden his experience, Danish aims to work with reputed companies like Hero, Yamaha, Bajaj and others to shift his focus more to the technical aspect of the job. He plans to take a jump from agency payroll to a company payroll in 5 years. Eventually, after getting a secure monthly package of one lakh rupees in the coming years, Danish plans to try his hand at stock marketing and later become a full-time investor.

He often reminisces how if his path had not crossed with SADRAG, he would not have been where he is today in terms of stability and security. He compares SADRAG's efforts to nurturing a sapling. Once the root is firm, the plant doesn't need to depend upon the other to grow into a huge fruit-bearing tree. Danish feels that SADRAG rooted him well. Danish believes that this firm rooting provided by SADRAG at such a formative time in his life has enabled him to bring some economic stability to his household.





Gourish Singh

Rising from the ashes of loss and lack

An inspiring story of a young boy whose zest for learning navigated him through personal loss and hopelessness.

Gourish Singh was three years old when he met with the first horror of his life. The baby boy had slipped through a flight of stairs at his residence in Agahpur, a village in Noida (U.P.). While the forehead injury didn't end up being a life-threatening event, the injured boy had to be administered with 13 stitches. The little boy who had joined a small village school in the vicinity back then had to give up the opportunity to learn due to an injury that required immediate recuperation.

Gourish was born in a family of six members that included his father, mother, three brothers and a sister. The family has its roots in Noida and owns a house. The now 17-year-old Gourish has no clear memories of his life before five years of age but remembers one tragic episode that changed it for the worse. The year 2012 brought a wave of misfortune to his family when the young boy tragically lost his father. He faintly remembers the cause of his death. His father had fallen hard into the loop of alcohol addiction which was probably the leading cause of his premature demise.

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As far as my memory goes, my dad suffered through some psychological troubles. Most probably it was the alcohol that eventually made him sick.

.....Gourish

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Gourish's struggles with receiving primary education existed far before his father's passing away.

In the face of addiction, his father had left his job as a hardware engineer. Gourish and his eldest brother who were then enrolled in a small private school in the village had to drop out of it as a consequence of not being able to pay the fees. His early childhood is marked by financial instability and turbulence at home. As a young boy, he witnessed a hostile environment at home which wasn't conducive enough to support learning. Following his father's death, Gourish's family found themselves in a better position to think more hopefully about the future. However, financial struggles haunting the family spewed some anger in Gourish who grew up with limited expectations from the world.

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What many don't know about Gourish is that he has these bouts of anger somedays. You might not see it very often but it lurks beneath his calm composure. I don't know whether it is grief or denial or just frustration, Gourish hardly speaks about his father. As a mother, I know my child has seen some hard things in life. He never asks for anything beyond his basic needs.

.....Gourish

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With no breadwinner in the family, Gourish's kins had no other option but to accept the help coming from the extended family. With all four siblings too young to work, Gourish's aunts and uncles stepped forward to provide a helping hand in sustaining the family's basic needs for survival.

A struggle for survival

To help the family come to terms with the new reality, Gourish's uncle and aunt made the first move. Gourish's aunt (father's sister) decided to take complete responsibility for his elder brother who was also the eldest sibling in the house. She took him to her house where the young boy grew up for the rest of his formative years and continues to nest there.

On the other hand, Gourish's uncle (mother's brother) decided to take complete charge of his household. With Gourish and his other two siblings being little, his mother couldn't go out to work. His family decided to look for alternatives to earn money. Fortunately, having a house in their name was a saving grace for the struggling family. The house that was carved into 5-6 rooms was the key to their future income. Gourish's uncle and mother decided to put four of the rooms on rent. Getting tenants on board, the family was able to earn rupees 2000 for each room. Hence, the monthly income of the family reached up to rupees 8,000. The amount was put into fulfilling the basic needs of the family like clothing and getting Gourish enrolled in a local school. Groceries and other additional expenses were taken care of by his uncle who was at the forefront in making all decisions for the family.

SADRAG came to his rescue

The education Gourish started to receive in his early formative years was inconsistent and slow-paced. Also, the village school lacked a standard curriculum that most city schools follow. Nonetheless, at this stage, Gourish's family had no other way out than to make him continue with whatever little learning he was receiving. He was a child of limited needs and never thought he could afford quality learning. Around seven years of age, Gourish's life path crossed with SADRAG. One of the teachers in the local school met Gourish's mother and convinced her to formally enrol him at Ugta Suraj Centre, a community learning space associated with SADRAG to provide free education to out-of-school children. Gourish attended Ugta Suraj for a few months. He fondly remembers how he had learned to draw on a sheet and paint it. He loved playing with other children and had access to so many toys and games.

Enrolled under Vidya Ratna

Under Vidya Ratna, a school sponsorship program initiated by SADRAG, Gourish was selected for enrolment in Class 2 at the prestigious Noida Public Senior Secondary School, Sector 23, Noida.

Gourish thinks of his school enrolment as one that transformed his life upside down. He was now part of a reputed school that ensured quality learning. His family didn't spend even a penny on his learning journey since then. The challenges Gourish faced in the initial few years of his schooling were due to a change in the medium of instruction. It took him time to adapt himself to the English language. However, as time passed, he began to realize that compared to the Hindi language, English was easier to grasp and learn. The trajectory of Gourish's performance in class started to get better with time. Soon he found himself among the first three rank holders of the class. Gourish earned the reputation of a sincere student all his way up till class 10.

A life-turning revelation

In higher secondary classes, Gourish realized his passion for studying Life Sciences. He developed an interest in studying more about plants and animals. Eventually, he decided to pursue the path of becoming a doctor but for that, he knew that his basics should be clear at the core.

A teacher in the same school offered to provide him with private tuition which could assist his learning process. Gourish took up classes to understand the concepts more clearly. It was through private tuition that Gourish came to know about NEET* and the role of quota in securing admission to medical colleges. After serious thought, Gourish decided to change his school in class 11 from Noida Public School to Sarvodaya Co-Education School, which is a government school under the Govt. of NCT of Delhi.

Gourish thought with this transition he could secure the Delhi quota which would help him later in getting admission to a medical college or make the process easy in some way. Being a government-run school, Gourish was not expected to pay any fees. Other expenditures like buying books and learning resources were being taken care of by SADRAG.

* Medical Entrance Test (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test)

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Had I been studying in that village school, I fear I won't have known a thing about NEET. These small village schools have their own private curriculum and books which don't run parallel to the standard syllabus followed by most city schools. Hence, the children who study in these schools are often clueless about competitive exams and how to prepare for them. I feel fortunate to have studied in a good school and even more fortunate to have SADRAG in my life because of which I found this direction.

.....**Gourish**

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SADRAG stood by him through the transition

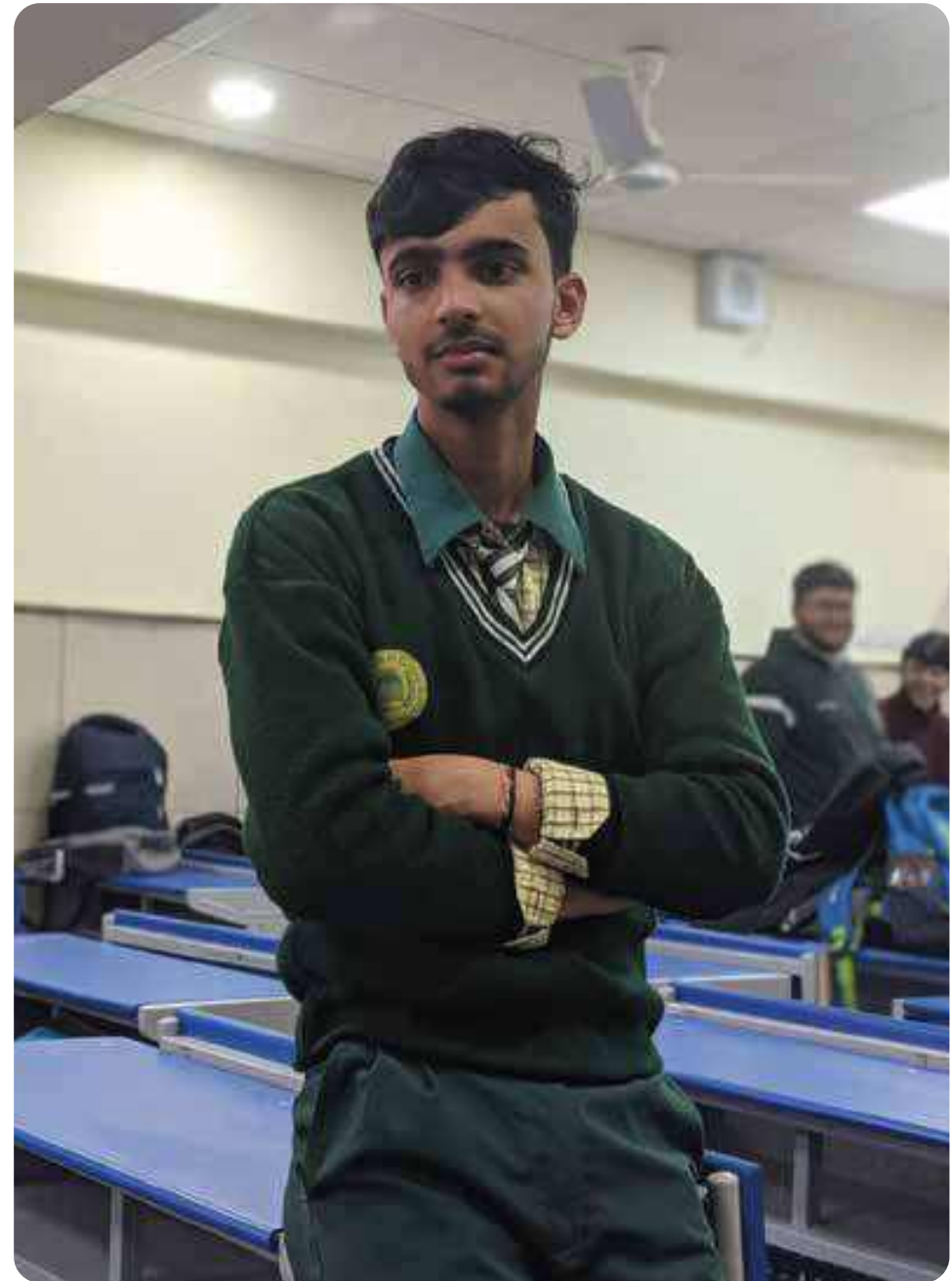
Gourmish couldn't continue with his private tuition due to his new routine which was more demanding in terms of time. While the transition from a private school to a government school was a pragmatic choice, it came with its own set of challenges for him that included daily travel and increased expenses. The SADRAG continued to take care of his educational expenses like his books and other resources both during and after his transition to the new school.

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SADRAG made this transition of schools an effortless process for me. The organization supported my decision knowing well that it would suit my case. It believed in my thought process and didn't pull away its hand.

.....Gourish

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A helping hand during COVID

In 2021, when the entire country was raging a war against the life-threatening coronavirus, Gourish's family was supported by SADRAG in more areas of life apart from education. The organisation not only provided Gourish with a phone with which he could continue his classes at home but also provided his family with daily needs. The organisation helped the family with rashan which included rice, pulses, cereal, soap and other basic requirements.

Where is Gourish in his life today?

Today, Gaurish is in class 12. He leaves his home for school around 7 in the morning and is back by 3 in the afternoon.

Gaurish is effectively using technology to enhance his knowledge. He has joined Physicswallah, an online ed-tech to prepare for NEET and JEE entrance examinations. Following Class 12 board examinations, Gourish has his first NEET entrance examination on 4 May 2024. He is studying these days with all his might.

Gaurish makes his own decisions. His goal is clear and he is working diligently towards it. He has planned his study time himself to give it an undivided and focussed attention.

With Gourish's uncle still supporting the family, he feels that he can pay full attention to his studies and not get distracted by the continued financial constraints at home. Gourish's younger sister and brother continue to study at a small private school in the neighbourhood of village Agahpur. Gaurish often experiences the guilt of being the chosen one in the family while his siblings couldn't afford to get into a good and reputed school. However, Gaurish constantly helps them with their studies at home. For now, Gourish plans to give his all to the upcoming medical entrance.



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I want to help my siblings in studies but I believe that if I am not able to help myself, I won't be able to help them. I have to focus on my exams since that's the ticket to my success.

.....Gourish

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The virtual classes are 1.5 to 2 hours long. However, what we listen and note down is not enough to crack NEET. We need at least 4 to 5 hours to sit with the notes, make our own and apply those formulas to worksheet questions. Hence, practice is the only way out. There is just one way to get through NEET and that is consistency and undivided focus. I am sure I will be able to clear the examination in the second attempt.

.....Gourish

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What inspired Gourish to pursue medicine?

Gourish's mother often suffers from severe headaches and despite being to doctors, has not been able to get rid of it. He feels that his becoming a doctor will not only help his family but will also help others who might be struggling to receive quality healthcare in lower-income groups of society.

“

I have witnessed how poor people are exploited by the healthcare sector in our country. I have realized how a poor man's health is neglected or dismissed by the corrupt health system. I wish to provide quality health service to people who can't afford it.

.....Gourish

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Gourish's mother often suffers from severe headaches and despite being to doctors, has not been able to improve. Gourish feels that if SADRAG had not crossed his path, he would have still known what a doctor is but he would have never known about the most basic exam that is the first step to becoming one. en able to get rid of it. He feels that his becoming a doctor will not only help his family but will also help others who might be struggling to receive quality healthcare in lower-income groups of society.

“

I always knew what the destination was, SADRAG gave me a way to it.

.....Gourish

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Divya

Where there's a will, there's a way

From a village school to a reputed institution, Divya's story is one of finding light in the most unexpected places.

On a cold Saturday morning, a 20-year-old Divya picks up the call hastily while she helps her mother with the week's laundry. In a sweet voice accompanied by a short giggle, she explains how her phone is troubling her. She could only hear voices but no name flashed across the blank screen.

Divya's childhood was similar to the damaged phone, providing her with the bare minimum. Her family of a father, mother, one elder sister and a younger brother live in a rented room in Nithari village in Noida, U.P. Though the family has found life in Noida, having migrated here around 21 years ago in search of a sustainable livelihood, it continues to stay connected to its ancestral roots in a village in Kanpur, U.P.

On arrival in Noida, Divya faced a struggle to find the right place to study before her paths crossed with SADRAG when she was 13 years of age. Previously, she along with her elder sister and brother did some school hopping, dropping out from a few in the middle of the session. A poor economic situation at home was responsible for the unstable start in her learning journey.

Divya's father who is the only earning member of the family offers a tailoring service in an open market space in Sector -19 in Noida. He doesn't own a shop but all he has is a sewing machine which he implants in a fixed spot on the roadside. With a monthly income of not a sum more than 10000 INR, her father often found himself worried about whether he would ever be able to support the education of three children.

Days when learning didn't come easy

Divya comes from a family where earnings are inconsistent and no fixed figure reaches home. These constraints never allowed her the freedom to dream of obtaining a quality education.

At first, when the family migrated to Noida, for some time Divya stayed back in her former village in Kanpur. At the beginning of her learning journey, she enrolled in a local school there. The village school lacked a fixed curriculum and fell short of a standard routine. Eventually, Divya's father thought it wise to call her back to Noida where there would be better options for learning. Divya was enrolled in another local school in Nithari. Her father who is the only earning member of the family offers a tailoring service in an open market space in Sector -19 in Noida. He doesn't own a shop but all he has is a sewing machine which he implants in a fixed spot on the roadside. The family has a monthly income of not a sum more than 10000 INR out of which rupees 4,500 is spent as rent of the room. The restrictive resources became an obstacle in the path of providing quality education to the three children.

“

My father hasn't taken even a day off or a sick leave since the time we shifted to Noida. He carries the entire economic burden is on his shoulders. He can't even slack for a day. It wasn't practically possible for us to enrol in good schools.

.....Divya

”

The local school in Nithari wasn't able to hold Divya's attention for long. She subsequently dropped out of it in the wake of an inconsistent curriculum. Just when she thought the gates of learning were shutting down on her, a new beginning was on the horizon.

SADRAG emerges as the dawn

Seeing many children going to a community learning centre in the neighbourhood, Divya became curious. One day, she decided to join the children and followed them to the Ugta Suraj Centre, a community learning space supported by SADRAG which provided free learning to out-of-school children. Impressed, 13-year-old Divya instantly enrolled for the same. There she was told by one of the facilitators that she could secure admission to a reputed school if she was able to pass the calibre test which was soon to follow. Divya recalls how the centre had refined her basics such as making her spell on weekdays, alphabets, vowels, character formation and brushing other fundamentals.

“

I could strike a difference between my old learning patterns and the new ones I was being trained into. In many village schools, there is no system or structure. Many of them have no standard affiliation and don't take learning that seriously. Sometimes there is shortage of teachers, other times they pass you even when your performance is not up to the mark. For the first time I felt I was doing something important.

.....Divya

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Divya studied well to become a part of 'Vidya Ratna', a school sponsorship program initiated by SADRAG. She was selected for enrolment in Class 5 at the prestigious Noida Public Senior Secondary School, Sector 23, Noida.

A free ticket to a reputed school

With Divya securing admission to the well-known school, a great economic burden was lifted off her father's shoulders who now had to only worry about the education of the remaining two children. Books, uniforms, stationery, bags and all resources that assist learning were provided by SADRAG.

“

After my parents, it was SADRAG who looked after me. They not only provided me with the essential learning resources, they also took care of my well-being. Whenever I approached any member of SADRAG, they helped me in the best possible way. Most importantly, it felt so good that someone could take off some burden from the poor man's shoulder who had been carrying it for such a long time. I know my dad is really tired.

.....Divya

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Changes don't come easy

Though getting into a reputed school was transformative, it brought some new challenges in Divya's life. The biggest obstacle was adjustment to the new learning environment.

On her first day at school, Divya reached an hour early. She found herself to be the first student on the empty campus. This was motivated by both a sense of excitement and fear.

The new system of reaching at a fixed time was overwhelming and confusing at the same time. For a year, Divya felt like a fish pulled out of water. The huge campus made her anxious. During the initial days, she struggled to find her classroom. A sudden jump from a local village school to a prestigious one had uprooted her completely. She found herself all over the place. One entire year, she spent in a corner of the class. She found other students to be different to her in terms of culture and mannerisms. This made her feel like a misfit. Being an introvert by nature, she grew more silent than usual. From having a few books in the old village school to numerous books in the new one, it took her time to take in the changes and settle in with the new reality. Always being instructed in Hindi, understanding the English language didn't come easy to her during the first year of admission. At this vulnerable point, SADRAG stood by her like a rock which encouraged her to march ahead no matter what obstacles threatened her path.

“

There were days when I used to rush in to SADRAG's office in Noida, whining about the language barrier and cultural differences I found at school. SADRAG just like a parent figure used to listen to my challenges and motivate me in all possible ways. I never went back home without feeling hopeful again. SADRAG was far more than an organisation. It not only provided me with free education but rather nurtured me at my lowest.

.....Divya

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Sooner things began to look up in Divya's life. After a year in Noida Public School, she started to mingle with other students and formed genuine friendships. Divya's scores started to improve considerably after class 5. She started to get help from her teachers and other students. As she stepped into secondary classes, she started to earn the reputation of a sincere and hardworking student. She cleared class 10 with a good percentage of 76.4 per cent.

Learning to be one's saviour

Divya who often took inspiration from her elder sister's determination to study and work hard knew that things were much easier for her with SADRAG holding her hands.

She understood that if she was sincere with the opportunity SADRAG had provided her, she would be able to change her destiny for the better. However, as she entered her teens, she realized that she needed money to sustain her growing needs. Seeing him working tirelessly for years, Divya had no courage to ask her father for help. Her eyes again went on to her sister who was taking home tuition to support her needs. Divya decided to do the same. Divya was in class 12 when her house became a niche for 4 to 5 neighbourhood students who came to her for tuition. She started her journey in teaching by charging a humble amount of rupees 200 as her fee for each student.

Resources are not to be exhausted

From an early age, Divya inculcated a love for community and resources. She knew whether it was learning or money, it had to be shared equally with all. She developed the sensibility of asking for help at the right time. This consciousness of her was reflected in every decision she made in her life.

Starting when she needed pocket money, Divya didn't even bring the topic to her father's awareness. Instead, she started to give tuition, trying to save some of the fees she earned. She wasn't reckless with the little figure she received. She compromised her desire to buy some goodies with it and rather tucked the money away in her closet.

Though SADRAG was with her all along her schooling journey, she never wished to overutilize the help she was getting from the organization. In senior classes, she knew the time had come for her to seek help when Economics started to make her anxious. At this point, she asked SADRAG to help her find a private tutor who could teach her. The organisation provided her with a young teacher who could provide private lessons to Divya at her doorstep. SADRAG took responsibility for the tutor's fees.

The organisation helped Divya at times when she didn't even ask for it. During COVID, SADRAG extended its support to sustain the family's basic needs by providing them with ration items like rice, cereals, soap and also a mobile phone through which Divya could take online classes without any interruption.



“

I always knew in my heart that SADRAG was not just supporting me but many others like me. While for every small inconvenience I could have walked towards the organization, I didn't find it a fair thing to do. I knew Mala ma'am would try to help me out in all possible ways but I always wanted to ask for help at the right time. The organisation for already doing so much for me, I didn't want to overutilize the benefits.

.....Divya

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Life after intermediate

Divya's hard work paid off when she cleared her Intermediate exam with flying colours. She scored a fascinating percentage of 92.4 per cent. Getting an above-average score in class 12 removed many potential obstacles that could have blocked her journey ahead.

Her impressive percentile earned her a merit-based admission in a reputed college affiliated with Delhi University. Today Divya is pursuing her Bachelor in Political Science from the Delhi College of Arts and Commerce. The college demanded a sum of rupees 10,000 as the entry fees to the course. Just when the family thought they could afford the fees, they found themselves in a cross-road situation. Divya's aunt required surgery which demanded immediate monetary help from the family. The two pressing expenses made things confusing and difficult for the family.

At this vulnerable point, Divya had no other option but to ask for help from extended family. She had SADRAG as her last resort for help. Fortunately, she was able to borrow the necessary funds from within the family. Adding her savings from the tuition, she was able to pay her first fees.

Smart, pragmatic and hardworking

Divya knew that having a regular college would mean increased expenses. Transport and examination fees were among the major ones. She decided to make some smart choices in her life. Seeing that she was hardly earning any money from tuition at her home, she decided to travel and give private tuition. She reduced the number of children coming to her home for classes. The change worked for her in a good way. From initially earning within rupees 1000, Divya started to earn somewhere around 4000 INR. She used it to pay for college fees and transportation expenses. Divya keeps a rope-tight schedule. Starting her day at 5, she leaves for the college at 7 and is back home by 3. By the time she reaches home, she has to rush through her meal to meet her students on time. While her week is full of hustle between college and tuition, she spares the weekend for studies.

Divya has seen the light

Having studied in Noida Public School has given her a broadened perspective on life. She brims with self-confidence and a positive self-image.

Beacon of hope for the family

Divya's family has many expectations from her. She not only has the responsibility of looking after her ageing parents but also her childless uncle and aunt (father's brother and his wife). On this journey, she is accompanied by an elder sister and a brother who is still in school. Her father is getting old and has been working relentlessly for years now. She determines to take off some burden from his weary shoulders. Divya aims to clear the UPSI (Universities' Police Science Institute) examination this year. She also has a backup plan to pursue a postgraduate course in international relations. She has kept her mind open and her ideas broad. She feels that if things don't work out in her favour, she won't lose her heart.

“

SADRAG has in a way transformed my life by giving me the opportunity to study in a big school. Children coming from humble backgrounds often find themselves feeling less competent among those who are studying in reputed schools. The reason is simply the differences in upbringing. Whatever people might say but those of us who are not fluent in English have this innate shyness to initiate conversations. My way of saying things or even the tone I used differed from many others in the classroom. However, I realized over a period that there is so much beauty in studying in schools where children of all social strata co-exist and grow together. We lose inhibitions and gain a sense of confidence that pushes us forward. Our perspective of life broadens. Intimidation gives way to a universal mind that is accepting of different ideas, people and cultures. You know what I might have lost if my paths had not crossed with NPS school, a beautiful stretched mind which has risen above restrictive beliefs. I owe this to SADRAG.

.....Divya

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Manju Tomar

Story of a Homemaker Turning
Into a Trailblazer For Financially
Dependent Women

After a break of 15 years, Manju picked up her studies from where she left.

Manju Tomar's life started with a whimper. The 40-year-old woman was born and bred in Jarcha village in Gautam Budh Nagar district (Uttar Pradesh). Growing up in poverty-stricken conditions, receiving a quality education was a faint dream to her.

From dropping out of secondary classes to becoming a community group leader, Manju's life has been quite a journey. She is grateful for having encountered SADRAG which changed the course of her life in an unexpected direction.

Manju, whose family comprised of parents and five brothers, didn't have an easy childhood. Her family struggled for survival. Her father owned a fairly infertile piece of land which rendered poor productivity of crops. The family couldn't make more than rupees 300 a month and could only afford to live in a kutchra house. With an ailing father, Manju and her brothers were at the forefront of doing farm-related work.

Apart from working at the farm, she had an unwavering determination to study. She got enrolled in a nearby Jain Vidya Sadan school that held classes up to 8th standard. Paying a humble sum of rupees 20 as her fees each month, she was more than happy to have been able to study in a school.

Manju was an ambitious child. When she got fixated on an idea or goal, she left no stone unturned. Once when she desperately wanted a television to watch, she alongside her brother started to grow and cultivate rice. Later selling it, she bought a black and white TV for rupees 1,100. The same determination translated into her desire for learning.

However, she couldn't convince her parents to make her study beyond secondary school. Being the only daughter in the family, they grew overprotective of her and didn't allow her to travel to far-off places to study. Hence, Manju left school after clearing class 8.

“

My parents used to think that if I become too educated, they will have to look for an equally learned husband for me. This would restrict rishtas for me. It would also mean that they would have to give more dowry. We didn't have that much money to offer.

.....Manju

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Desire for learning resurfaces after 15 years

In 2003, Manju got married into a family who hailed from Galand village (Hapur district of Ghaziabad). Her husband's family comprised of 3 brothers, 3 sisters and parents. Growing up in a social fabric where a woman's sense of worth comes from the duties she discharges at her husband's house, Manju was motivated to prove herself as a capable daughter-in-law in the eyes of the family.

For a short while, Manju closed her eyes on learning. She decided to devote all her attention to taking care of her husband's family.

In 2005, Manju entered motherhood. She gave birth to a son. She became all the more committed to her family life. Giving birth to her second son in 2007, raising her kids became her utmost priority. Ten years went by and Manju got accustomed to her new life as a mother. Her desire to pursue learning was diluted by maternal responsibilities.

In 2014, on a usual visit to her mother's house, Manju's brothers stirred up a conversation about the untimely break in her studies. Unexpectedly, her mother nostalgically reminisced on Manju's commitment towards learning. For the first time, her brothers, two of whom were then in jobs, encouraged her to pick up studies where she left. Her long-forgotten ambition to learn re-surfaced after 15 years.

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Starting where she left

Manju's sons were now growing less demanding of her attention. Her brothers thought it to be the right time for Manju to get back to her studies. By this time, she had completely won the confidence of her mother-in-law who became her confidant. When Manju was doubtful about her husband's reaction to her going back to school again, her mother-in-law took a stand for her.

In 2017, Manju's eldest brother got her enrolled at Brahmadeva Inter College (Gautam Budh Nagar) where she completed her classes 9 and 10. For these two years, her brothers took responsibility for the school fees.

Manju narrated how after completing all her work in the kitchen, at night she used to find a cozy spot and study.



Seeing her dedication towards her studies, Manju's husband had a change of heart. He decided to support his wife's ambition in every possible way. In 2019, Manju's husband got her enrolled in Vatsaraj Swatantra Bharat Inter College in Kalonda (Gautam Budh Nagar) where she completed classes 11 and 12. This time, the financial support for her education was extended by her husband. Meanwhile, Manju never faltered with her responsibilities at home. Her sincerity won the hearts of all her family members who started to help her find a balance between her household responsibilities and her studies.

Manju's three brothers became her biggest strength during this time. Her eldest brother, who was a teacher, kept supervision over her curriculum, the middle one helped her revise her lessons while she worked in the kitchen and the youngest one helped her commute between school and home.

Later, Manju continued her distance learning and completed her degree in B.A from Keshav Marwar Girls Degree College (Hapur district).

SADRAG opened a door to endless opportunities

Manju had never imagined a life beyond her house. She was contented with her family supporting her studies but had no plans to translate this learning into a job that could get her a sense of purpose or make her earn some money.

To support her husband's family, Manju started to take up sewing work at home. On an ordinary day, a client dropped in and casually told her about a Women's Day campaign being run by SADRAG. She told Manju how the agenda of the program was to help unemployed women do small businesses and become economically independent. Without any hesitation, Manju filled out the form as a potential beneficiary of the campaign.

SADRAG selected Manju and nine other capable women who were eligible for the scheme. The initiative by the organisation involved attaching a group of 10 women to a bank account and lending them a loan of INR 1 lakh ten thousand with a humble monthly return of rupees 500 for each woman. The idea was to find a low-investment business that could attract attention from the market and help these women become financially independent.

As SADRAG wanted these women to make the most of the opportunity, they invited a group of students from IMT College (Institute of Management Technology, Ghaziabad) who taught them how to prepare dish wash liquid and sell it in the market.

Manju took part in the training with brimming enthusiasm. She wasn't certified as a leader but she had already started to act as one. She alongside her mother-in-law conducted afternoon meetings at her home where all the 10 women met and discussed how they could market their dish-wash more effectively. The market received their product with grace. Sales went up and the group was able to make rupees 7,000 a month.

The same year, Manju was awarded by SADRAG for her diligent efforts and was made president of the small alliance. This acknowledgement boosted her self-confidence by leaps and bounds. Her growing ambition took SADRAG by surprise who were equally in awe of her spirits.

“

When I received the award from SADRAG, I honestly couldn't believe it. I might be capable of doing many things in near future but when I look back, I feel had SADRAG not recognized my potential back then, I wouldn't have been able to muster the confidence to do anything. SADRAG found the leader in me. Even I didn't know it existed.

.....Manju

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Under Manju's leadership, four more women alliance groups came into being. Each group consisted of 10 women. This was able to catch the attention of the local government bodies who got these groups attached under NRLM (National Rural Livelihood Mission), a government initiative that aimed at poverty reduction through building institutions, particularly for women and enabling these institutions to access a range of financial services and livelihoods.

Under the scheme, the group led by Manju and other similar groups started to get work opportunities directly from the government. Manju's first project as a team leader was to stitch uniforms for 3 branches of Kanyapathshala school (in Galand). The group was able to earn a handsome sum of INR 90,000 for the task. This was followed by an offer to act as suppliers of dry rations for nearby Anganwadi centres.

Meanwhile, SADRAG kept on supporting the group by helping them with the display of home-made products at big events.

“

I always say this, my family supported me within close doors and SADRAG supported me on the streets. When we started to get opportunities from the government, any self-focused organisation would have pulled away the help immediately. But SADRAG stood with us even when we didn't ask for help. It never gave upon us.

.....Manju

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Where is Manju today?

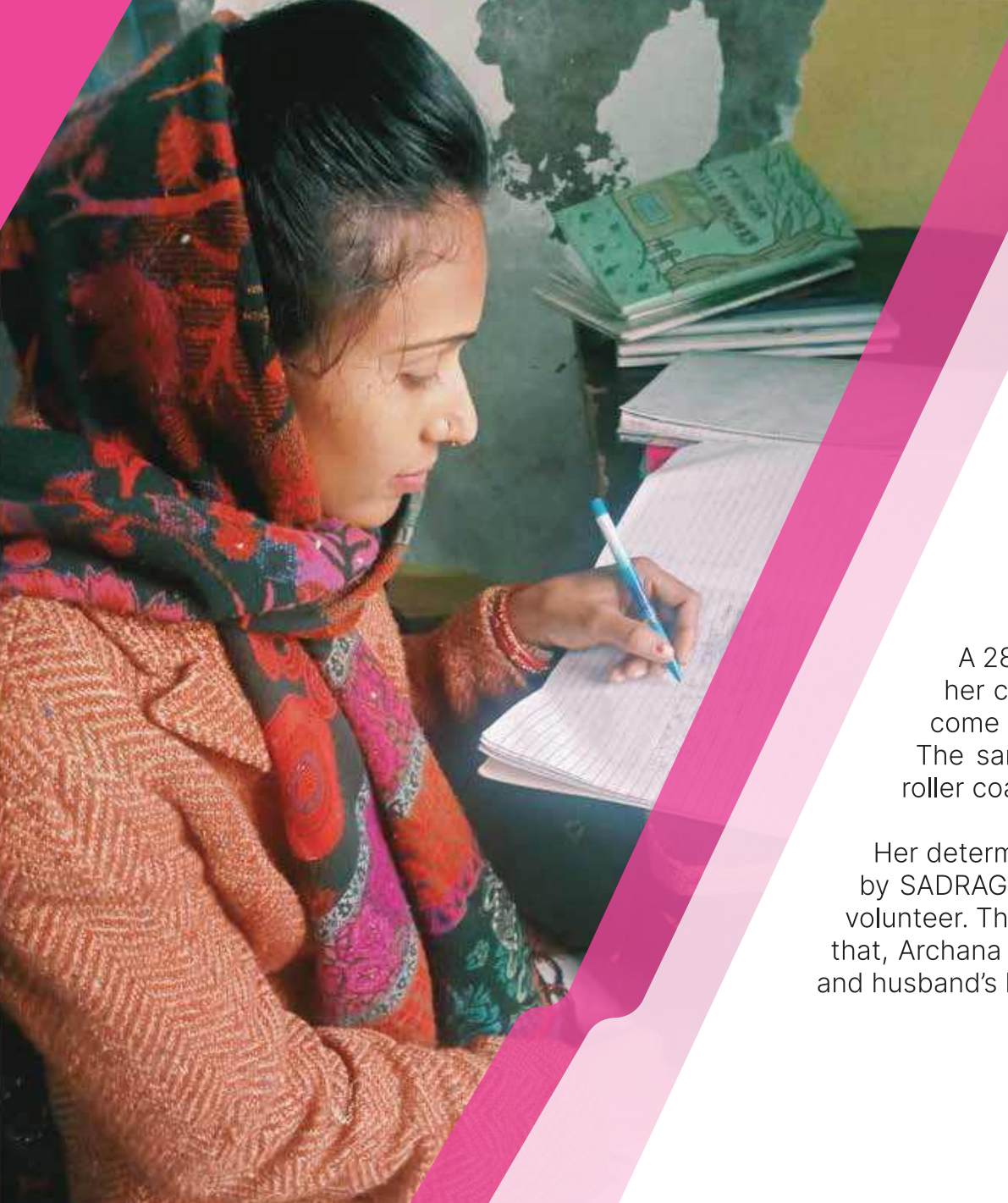
Since the time SADRAG started to believe in Manju, she didn't stop living up to its expectations. Under the same scheme, Manju enrolled at RUDSET (Rural Development and Self Employment Training Institute) where she took six months of training in car driving.

Under the Bank Mitra program, Manju also got trained in basic bank-related operations like helping people open bank accounts, executing transactions, NEFT and other modes of online banking.

Having received the necessary training, today she serves as B.C Sakhi (a community worker who provides a range of financial services on behalf of the bank to her community). She has secured a seat in the Panchayat office (Galand) alongside other officers. She earns a sum of rupees 4,000 as her monthly salary.

Manju has grown independent in all possible ways. She is grateful to SADRAG for making her stand on her feet. Interestingly, she continues to pursue her Master's through distance learning. The multitasking woman is also a mother to two capable grown-up sons. While one is preparing for medicine, the younger one will be appearing for board exams this year. In this breathtaking journey, she has lost a close comrade, her mother-in-law who succumbed to illness last year. However, she feels hopeful that SADRAG will always be there to hold her hands.





Archana

Family's unsung heroine
finds a purpose

An inspiring story of 28-year-old Archana who found her life purpose as a community volunteer after embracing motherhood.

A 28-year-old Archana is a mother to two children. Unlike Archana, her children are not fighting for the basic need of education. It has come easy to them with a mother who makes sure they receive it. The same cannot be said for her whose journey to learning was a roller coaster ride where resistance waited for her at every turn.

Her determination to find a purpose in life was years later harnessed by SADRAG which offered her an opportunity in the role of a community volunteer. This made her rediscover her path to education. However, before that, Archana had to put up a brave fight for education both at her father's and husband's house.

Brave face at parental home

Archana comes from a family of parents, 7 sisters and 2 brothers. Most of her pre-marital life was spent in the Etah district of Uttar Pradesh. She was born into an Agri-based family where farming was the only known way of life. The family's yearly income was somewhere around INR 25,000. The money was enough to feed a family of 11 but not enough to send them to school. Formal education was out of question for most of her elder siblings who could only study up to class 5 and eventually dropped out, to assist and earn for the family.

Archana, unlike her older sisters, had a different bent of mind. Education was not an option for her but a stubborn demand. She was the first in the family who thought of learning as a fundamental right and reinforced her decision to pursue it. However, life at home wasn't conducive for her to study. As a young girl, she was expected to take up the household chores. Rearing cattle, collecting milk, and making chappatis at home were the tasks assigned to her.

The 10-year-old Archana once discovered a small government school by the name, Janata Inter College at village Kaitha which was about 3 Km from her house. She wanted to be enrolled there. However her mother was dead against it. She confronted her about how the family couldn't afford to marry off 9 children if all were to go to school and pay INR 300 as a monthly fee for each child. Archana refused to listen and subsequently, her mother bowed down to her wish. They both reached a middle ground where Archana was allowed to study but on the condition of succeeding in all the classes. Otherwise, she would be pulled out of the school without any hesitation. Instead of taking it as a threat, Archana embraced the challenge.

With her deep conviction to study, Archana convinced her parents to provide her with a second-hand bicycle for transport and also took two of her younger siblings to school along with her.

When the school fees spiked to INR 900 in senior classes, Archana's ambition was saved by the scholarships she earned with her good performance. Her family didn't have to put in more money to continue her schooling.



I never missed a day at school. I used to get up early, do all the farm work and household chores before time and then rush to the school. My mother was not very happy. She thought it to be a waste of money that could be used for my marriage. I had no choice but to perform well to continue my studies. I got enrolled in class 6 and studied there up till class 12. I was the first daughter in the family to have studied till intermediate. I worked hard and didn't fail even a single class.

.....Archana



A groom who could support dreams

While Archana's father believed in her dreams, marriage was the next important step for girls in their community. He however, decided to find her a husband who could support her studies after marriage.

When Archana cleared class 12, the family started to actively look for a groom. They found a potential match in district Mainpuri in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The boy had two younger brothers, parents and grandparents. On fixing the marriage, Archana's father requested the groom to support Archana in her journey of learning. He amicably agreed to the request.

However, marriage brought additional responsibilities on Archana's shoulders who was now expected to take hold of the household. In the wake of this, her mother-in-law dismissed the idea of her studying further a few days after the marriage, strongly conveying that it shouldn't be her utmost priority being a married woman. Archana's journey of learning stopped.



I remember crying that night. I used to cry everytime a person used to deny me the right to learning. It used to sting me hard.

.....Archana



Archana did not give up. About 10 Km from her husband's house, a private institute was providing undergraduate courses like B.A (Bachelor of Arts). Archana asked the family if she could fill out the form. The institute demanded a yearly fee of INR 9,000 which was too much for the family to bear at that time. Her wish was turned down by a stern mother-in-law who thought that Archana should rather support the family at home.

The year 2017 brought an opportunity for Archana's husband who thought of shifting to Noida. She wanted to join him but was stopped by her in-laws. However, with persistent requests, she convinced her husband who then brought her to Noida along with him.

Life in Noida

Archana shifted to village Nithari in Noida along with her husband. They couple lived in a rented room with a shared community toilet. It cost them a sum of INR 2,500 a month. Her husband started to work as a security guard in a building and was able to make INR 10,000 a month.

Archana's life came to a standstill because she had neither the resources nor any opportunity to study further. Spending some time alone in their rented room, she started to brainstorm ideas. With her father's assistance, she resumed her studies at Sudama Devi College, district Etah through the distance learning mode. She enrolled in B.A (Bachelor of Arts) course. Alongside, she enrolled to learn basic computer skills in a nearby computer centre.

As Archana was trying to find a sense of purpose in the new city, an opportunity knocked at her door. She got an offer to teach children in a small neighbourhood school. The role wasn't permanent and she had to act as a filler till the time a professional teacher could take her place. For the first time in her life, Archana felt a sense of independence when the first salary of INR 3,000 was credited to her bank account.

Before the school could ask her to move out, Archana's destiny intervened. She was pregnant with her first child. She assumed it to be the end of her career.

A pregnant pause

Embracing motherhood in 2017, Archana became mother to a daughter. Her life started to revolve around the baby. In 2019, she conceived her second child. This time it was a boy. For 2 to 3 years, Archana devoted herself completely to her growing children and taking care of their needs.

The year 2022 brought a challenge to the family. Archana's brother-in-law met with a fatal accident that resulted in multiple fractures. The incident drained the family financially as Archana's husband was expected to extend monetary support for his treatment. While having a conversation with her mother-in-law, Archana assured her that if she could find some work opportunity, she would pay for her brother-in-law's prolonged treatment. Her assurance was taken as a faint possibility.

SADRAG discovered her

All the work opportunities that crossed Archana's path were short-lived and unfulfilling. She felt like her potential was not finding a stable ground.

As her children started to grow, Archana's anxieties around their education started to grow exponentially. A woman who fought so much for her learning couldn't let her children go astray and miss out on learning.

One day she saw some children going to a nearby learning centre. She followed them and found herself inside of Ugta Suraj Centre, a community learning place supported by SADRAG that provides free education to out-of-school children. Looking around the centre and seeing the efforts being put into making these children learn overwhelmed her heart. Promptly, she got her 6-year-old daughter enrolled in there.

Archana thought of trying her luck at getting a role at the centre. She had completed her B.A back in 2019 and was now a graduate. The organization asked her to appear for a calibre test. She was selected as a community volunteer to teach children at the centre.

Finding her purpose

Archana hailed from a family where a woman's role was limited to being someone's wife and mother. Getting an opportunity at SADRAG was like a dream come true for her. She had found a purpose in life which was to facilitate education reach homes like light reaches in the farthest, darkest places as a community volunteer.

As a community volunteer, her role at SADRAG involves reaching out to out-of-school children in the community, convincing their parents to send them to the centre and many times, walking them from their homes to the centre.

“

Children in small localities don't understand the importance of literacy. They are not motivated to study. Lack of family support and education not being the priority, are some reasons behind this resistance. They join the organisation but sometimes are too lazy to turn up. My service as a community volunteer is to spread awareness and also reinforce the urgency and need for education. My aim is to make sure that no home in the community is left with a child who is deprived of the fundamental need of learning.

.....Archana

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At the centre, Archana engages in various roles. She looks after the seating arrangement, engaging the children with toys and books, taking care of their needs, helping them fill colours in figures, teaching them alphabet formation, reciting poems with them and doing many other interesting activities.

Archana is a keen learner. She actively participates in monthly training programmes for facilitators so as to promote the physical, mental and emotional growth of the child.



“

SADRAG has given me a name and purpose. For the first time, I feel I am doing something important. This opportunity has boosted my confidence and have made me feel that it was all worth fighting for learning. I wish to serve the purpose as long as I can. It has changed the life of a married woman like me. I am very grateful for it.

.....Archana

”

Heroine of the family

Towards the end of 2023, Archana shocked her in-laws family by sending some of her accumulated savings to her husband's home. Seeing her keeping the promise of helping her brother-in-law get the necessary treatment, Archana's mother-in-law was in awe of her spirit. For the first time, she called Archana and told her that she shouldn't give up her present role. She is also convinced that her grandchildren must continue to study and stand on their feet like their parents did.

The economic situation at Archana's home has slightly improved with her husband also getting a raise in his salary. She has become a hero to her family who plays all her roles with enthusiasm.





Seema

A Woman Making Her Empire
In Early 50s

An inspiring story of 28-year-old Archana who found her life purpose as a community volunteer after embracing motherhood.

The social forces often make us feel we need to make the most of our ambitions before our 30s. It might stand true for many people out there. Seema's life has been quite unconventional in that sense. This is the story of a woman who discovered a sense of purpose in her early 50s and has been flourishing thereafter.

From growing up in challenging circumstances to building her own house, Seema has broken conventional stereotypes around age and limitations.

Rising above the stereotypes at home

Seema was born in Sikar district in Rajasthan in 1964. She is one among the seven daughters born to her parents. Her father fell for alcohol addiction and abandoned the household when her mother couldn't bear him a male child. Feeling incapacitated of providing for all the daughters, he left for Calcutta in search of better work opportunities.

The money he sent back home wasn't enough to support the family. Since then, Seema and her sisters solely depended on their mother's father for survival.

Back in the 1960s, education didn't come easy to Seema and her sisters. When her grandfather got Seema's eldest sister enrolled in a local school, she suffered through impolite remarks from the neighbourhood who thought learning made girls headstrong. With the interference of extended family, she was pulled out of school and married off at a tender age.

To prevent the same outcome with Seema, her mother asked her grandfather to take her away to Gurgaon, an urbanised location in the state of Haryana, where he lived. There Seema enrolled in a government school, paying 20 INR as her fees. She continued studying in the same school till class 12. Meanwhile, her mother suffered a backlash for sending her daughters to study.

“

They used to humiliate my mother by saying things like 'Will you make her a doctor or a mastarni?' They used to think that my sisters and I would grow up as arrogant girls who will find it hard to find husbands.

.....Seema

”

Interruption in dreams

In 1980, Seema cleared high school. The next best thing was to move to Bhatinda in Punjab with one of her married sisters who lived there with her husband. Fresh out of school, she promptly got the opportunity to take training in nursing under Dr Jasbir Sidhu, a foreign-returned doctor settled in the city. Seema had the innate quality of learning skills that involved a steady hand.

This made her good at her training. After 1.5 years of sincere hard work in learning how to nurse, Seema was suddenly called back to her home in Rajasthan. Her parents had decided to get her married.

Dropping her training in the middle, Seema was married into a large family who were settled in Mumbai. One of Seema's sisters who was married into the same family had initiated the proposal. Seema's skills were well-known to her husband who knew in prior he was marrying a high-value woman.

Unforeseen troubles strike

After her marriage in 1983, Seema started to face struggles in life. Her husband, who was an accomplished marathon player had a serious injury and he was forced to take up small jobs in companies, hospitals and other places. Though well-educated, fortune didn't favour the initiatives he took to have a stable income.

Parallely, Seema ended up in the kitchen all the time, feeding a large family of more than 10 members. The couple struggled to have a secured livelihood for the next seven years.

Being brought up by a stepmother, Seema's husband didn't enjoy much respect at home. Both Seema and her husband were asked to leave when her husband's small business initiative resulted in financial loss for the family.

In 1990, Seema and her husband ended up in Galand village (near Ghaziabad). This time they were with three children, a girl and two boys. While Seema's husband picked up a private job, she started to support the family by giving tuition to some children in the neighbourhood. She also started to attract customers for sewing work.

Struggles began to escalate for the family when her husband's injury developed a bad infection. This resulted in him missing out on work. He eventually lost his job in 2011, causing his family to hit another major financial crisis.

SADRAG showed up as light amid darkness

With her husband not being able to carry a job, Seema had no choice but to assume the role of a provider. For three years, she continued with small jobs. With some savings, she was able to manage her household and support her husband's treatment. However, the situation left her frustrated and over-worked.

In 2014, things shook up drastically when a woman in the neighbourhood informed Seema about SADRAG. She told her that the organization was forming women's self-help groups in the area which could empower them to stand on their feet.

Without any hesitation, Seema joined the self-help group (SHG) and started participating in training sessions. SADRAG involved students from IMT College as volunteers who could help upskill these self-help groups. The idea was to train them in micro-enterprise management such that they become empowered to run small standalone businesses and become economically independent.

With not many of them having a solo bank account in their name, SADRAG also helped them open an account. This way they could get credit facilities and also become eligible beneficiaries of government schemes.

SADRAG trained Seema and other SHGs women in financial skills that could potentially turn into a business plan. The organisation taught them to make several marketable products such as notebooks, handicrafts, artificial jewellery, organic colours, cotton bags, tiffin service etc.

The organisation observed that Seema had an entrepreneurial bent of mind. Her grasping of the skills and implementation of the training in the practical realm was distinctly noticeable.



Once the training part was over, Seema started to give those ideas a pragmatic form. She joined a Balwadi run by SADRAG and started serving as a teacher for out-of-school children. She started to receive some remuneration for her service.

Alongside teaching, she and her SHG women started to make tiffins for schools and college-going children, people working in corporate and others. She initially started with two tiffins and in no time, she was making 160 tiffins a day. She also involved her husband in the packing of tiffins and hired people to ferry the tiffins to schools, colleges and other places. She started to make a daily income of rupees 6000. This resulted in a big boost to her economic situation at home.

SADRAG got their SHG linked with a national bank and facilitated it to receive funds under National Rural Livelihoods Mission, a government scheme that provides credit services to rural populations, here specifically to women who are willing to run small-scale businesses.

Where is Seema now?

With her tiffin business attracting good attention, Seema was able to earn money rapidly. Taking a small housing loan and adding her savings to it, she was able to buy a three-room house in 2015. Being grateful to SADRAG for transforming her life, she offered one of the rooms to the organisation for running a balwadi for community children.

While the balwadi ceased to operate during COVID lockdowns, Seema continues to walk on the path of SADRAG's training. Today she leads the self-help group. She gets varied orders from different workspaces like binding registers for schools and colleges, making jute bags for companies, and sometimes making food items like honey, papad and others. Some orders are seasonal such as making colours for Holi and candles for Diwali. Interestingly, SADRAG not only helps with the marketing of these products but also trains the women in branding and packaging of the products.

Seema is a proud mother to a daughter who secured a position in the Rajasthan police and both her sons, placed equally well in the private sector. Seema is a happy woman.



“

When people ask me how did SADRAG help me, I tell them, it made me the provider of my house at a time when my husband couldn't be the one. Our fate could have turned for the worse but SADRAG came into our life as a breath of relief. I am also grateful to the organisation for not only showing me a way but also helping me discover my own potential.

.....Seema

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Shahrukh

A Celebratory Fight Against
Inner And Outer Obstacles

An encouraging story of a young man whose childhood was shadowed by illness and youth by limiting forces.

If Sharukh's formative years could be described in a few words, it would be chronic illness, poverty, conflicts with father and lack of direction in life. The same cannot be said for the same 25-year-old man who now has finally found a sense of purpose.

Sharukh's story closely touches on the physical, emotional and social challenges the migrant children face when their families move from rural settings to urban spaces in search of a better life. It also showcases a sense of hope and rising above these difficulties with education and upskilling.

Life started in a small village of Bihar

Sharukh was born in Siwan district of Bihar. His family comprised 3 brothers, 1 sister, parents and other relatives. While Shahrukh's father would make a decent sum of money from his job at a printing press, the focus was not much on teaching children. Most of Shahrukh's early learning was in a nearby madrasah (an educational institution offering instruction in Islamic subjects and other practicalities of life).

He was hardly three or four years of age when Shahrukh's family shifted to village Harola in Noida in search of a stable livelihood.

Illness shadowed his formative years

Shahrukh's father fetched a decent job in Noida, venturing further into the printing press operations. It was enough to sustain the family for an initial sometime. A teacher living in the same building convinced Shahrukh's family to send him to NC Public School, a reputed school in the neighbourhood. He was enrolled promptly on the advice. However, this period of growth was short-lived.

Life started to test the family when Shahrukh started to stay ill for extended periods. Meanwhile, his father also started to see fluctuations in the market. He found it logical to take the ailing child back to his hometown where he could get him treated at an affordable cost. For months, Shahrukh's symptoms including fever, chest pain and chronic congestion were mistaken for other medical conditions. He was later diagnosed with Tuberculosis of the lungs. By the time the young boy got his diagnosis, he had turned too weak to even walk his way out of the house. His learning got interrupted as he was limited to his ancestral home in Bihar.

Shahrukh's treatment was demanding for the family in terms of resources. It had already started to empty his father's pocket who had to shuttle between his workplace and hometown. Shahrukh was prescribed a protein-rich diet and other dietary supplements that were difficult to sustain with his father not having a steady income. It had also started to spark conflicts within the joint family. After completing a big portion of Shahrukh's treatment in Bihar, his father brought him to Noida, this time permanently.

SADRAG made him restart life in Noida

Shahrukh was around 11 years of age when he got back to village Harola in Noida. With only six months of his treatment pending, Shahrukh was motivated to restart his learning. He hadn't seen school in a long time. He was informed by his neighbourhood friends that SADRAG had opened a community learning centre for out-of-school-going children. Shahrukh was convinced that he could start learning from the point where he had left some five years ago. He promptly got enrolled at Ugta Suraj centre and the facilitators there helped him grasp the basics of learning such as alphabet formation, pronunciation and writing.

Later, under Vidya Ratna, the school sponsorship program of the organisation, Shahrukh got admission into class 2 of a renowned private school, the Noida Public Senior Secondary School.

Since Shahrukh was much older than the rest of the class, he started to excel in his studies from the very first year he joined. He quickly earned a reputation as an intelligent student.

Forces working against him

In class 8, Shahrukh's father was able to start a small printing press and soon started to gain material success. He wanted Shahrukh to be more involved in the family business and not get too involved in the 'utopian' ideology of changing the life with learning. Studying hard for so many years, Shahrukh was a changed boy at heart. More than mechanical work, he wanted to grasp harder the science of economy and how business owners can work smarter. While his father wanted him to have a conventional life of hard work, Shahrukh wanted to build a vision. He learnt that his family wasn't ready to look beyond basic survival. This resulted in a clash between the father and son. Having a dominating demeanour, Shahrukh's father exercised control over his schedule. Many days, he was asked to take leave from school and work at the factory instead. This resulted in Shahrukh attending classes in the morning and doing factory work such as cutting, folding and binding paper during the evening hours.

SADRAG became his confidant in distress

With advancing classes, Shahrukh felt unsure if he could manage both school and factory at the same time. Due to extreme exhaustion, he started to feel distracted from both. In class 10, when his father still wanted him at the factory during board examinations, Shahrukh lost his calm. This ended in a violent confrontation with his father. In frustration, he left school after class 10.

By this time, Shahrukh had a good command over printing press operations. He also had a certificate in graphic designing under Sarthak program of the organisation. To avoid daily arguments with his father, he secured a job in a local graphic designing studio which offered him a salary of 6000 INR. He moved to his uncle's place which was 100 miles away from his father's house. He offered his uncle a rent of rupees 2000, saving the rest for his survival.

Facilitators at SADRAG grew worrisome about his move. They didn't find it palatable for a capable student like Shahrukh to abandon his studies in the middle. The organisation started to convince him to restart his school. However, joining the school would have meant Shahrukh leaving his work and going back to his father's house. He wasn't ready for this. To make him agreeable to studies, the organisation offered him some money for daily transportation and the opportunity for shared accommodation with students in return for some community service. However, Shahrukh was inconsolable. The organisation encouraged him to pick up his studies for the next three months. At last, seeing their persistent efforts and genuine care for his future, he decided to join the school, again. With SADRAG's help, he enrolled in class 11 in the same school. There he went on to complete his intermediate without any further distractions.

Growing since then

After intermediate, Shahrukh was not able to continue his higher studies in the wake of two precautionary lockdowns during COVID and a poor financial situation at home after his father's business drowned. However, Shahrukh benefitted from having a background in formal learning. He didn't feel outdated in any job he took up and rather upskilled himself as per the requirements of the role.

Shahrukh's growth cannot be contested in terms of a stable job but he found his unique way of climbing the corporate ladder. He hopped from one job to another and every new role promised him better material advantages than the previous one.

Sharukh went on to serve various roles and earned experience in varied fields. Having learnt the ropes of operations and sales, 2023, he joined Nerolac, a well-known paint firm in 2023. Today he aspires to become a paint contractor himself and start a business of his own. He feels very positive about every move that he has made in life which he attributes to confidence building in him, being groomed by SADRAG.



I always tell people that I have two mothers, one at home and one at SADRAG. My biological mother couldn't take a stand for me because she became powerless in front of an inconsolable father. But my second mother, Mala ma'am, held me tight when I was getting distracted and going away from learning. She didn't give up on me as if I was her son. What SADRAG has done for me is what every family should do for their children and that is to encourage them to never give up on learning and understanding the power of education.

.....Shahrukh





Bhawna

Breaking Free From Prison Of Self Limitation

An empowering story of a girl who was too afraid to step out of her house!

While times are changing in favour of women, the undercurrent of patriarchal forces still shadows the belief systems of many Indian families. Bhawna is a 22-year-old woman whose fight for success was more on the inside of the house than on the outside. It took a long road for her to make her family believe in her potential to create an independent life outside of home.

Coming from an overprotective home to independently finding her calling in life, Bhawna's story shows how one can rise above limiting beliefs.

Loss of a father in early childhood

Bhawna's life started in Noida, district Gautam Buddha Nagar , U.P. where she lived with a family in a two-room house. She has a brother, 3 sisters and a mother in her family. She was merely three years old when her father, who worked in Delhi Jal Board, had contracted a serious ailment. Eventually, he lost the battle against time and passed away. It left the family helpless with no breadwinner to support their survival.

To lift the family out of acute economic distress, Bhawna's grandmother on mother's side, came to their aid. She promptly shifted with the family, filling dry rations with her late husband's pension. Meanwhile, Bhawna's mother started to desperately hunt for jobs that could fetch her some money. After a period of struggle, she was able to secure a position in her husband's office at a very low salary of 3000 INR in the initial few years. The loss of a father's assuring hand in their formative years resulted in Bhawna and her siblings not being able to think beyond their everyday life.

A mother who said 'no' to compromise

Though overprotective of her children, Bhawna's mother was not ready to cut loose on their formal education. Getting support from her mother, she decided to get all her children enrolled in the nearby private school. Her willingness to make her children study convinced the principal to accept fees in instalments. During tougher times, she even mortgaged the jewellery which she had from her marriage. However, there were times when the children felt humiliated in school due to pending fees. Despite hurdles, Bhawna's mother supported her learning till class 12. Fortunately, seeing her good performance in academics, the principal of the school allowed her to sit for many examinations with her registration fees still pending to date.

A house full of restrictions

While Bhawna's mother always supported her girls going to school, the brother started to act strangely in his late teens. Maybe the void of a father and the responsibility to take care of four sisters pushed some defensive buttons inside him. He gradually started assuming the role of a father and confused love for control. Bhawna and her sisters were soon under his instructions which stunted their social and academic growth. They were not allowed to step out of the house without a man or even have a mobile phone of their own. His overprotectiveness around them grew to limit their potential. Being the eldest sibling and the only man in the house, even Bhawna's mother couldn't do much to make him come out of his conservative perspective on life.

Bhawna's brother unintentionally became the limiting force in her life. He didn't support Bhawna when she wanted to change schools saying far-off places won't be safe for her. Due to breaks in his jobs, he couldn't maintain a stable career. Bhawna's mother was still the sole earner of the family. Bhawna and her sisters were restricted to staying within four walls of the house. To keep her entertained, Bhawna developed a fondness for indoor activities like painting and reading story books.

SADRAG slides in through a newspaper

On the condition of distance learning, Bhawna was allowed to pursue her Bachelor's from University of Delhi. The monthly income of the family was not enough to fulfil her growing needs. To protect backlash from her brother for working in far-off places, she decided to join her old school as a teacher. She easily got the job for a monthly salary of 3000 INR. The money she got helped her buy books for the course.

One day while skimming through the newspaper, a pamphlet carrying an advertisement for SADRAG's four-month skilling and livelihood course for youth slipped down on the floor. The free course was specifically designed for competitive exam aspirants and young people hunting for jobs or appearing for job interviews. The four-month training involved teaching students basic computer operations, improving fluency in English, training them in retail management, offering financial literacy and ensuring overall personality development.

With a sense of assertiveness, she approached her brother, seeking permission to join the course. Expectedly, the proposal was rejected on account of the training centre being at a distance from their house. Determined Bhawna involved facilitators at SADRAG to convince her rigid brother. The organisation left no stone unturned to make him agreeable. By the end of the course, Bhawna lost her hesitation to openly speak in front of other people. The course taught her how to initiate a conversation, how to answer in a professional setting, the posture to maintain when appearing for a job interview and how to face the world confidently.



Bhawna found the ladder to corporate life

Right after the lockdown, Bhawna lost her job as a teacher at NC Public School. She started to work in another school which paid her even less. Till August 2023, she continued serving in the school and then left. Disappointed due to stunted economical growth, Bhawna started to hunt for corporate jobs. Once while giving company to her elder sister who was appearing for an interview at an HR company, the recruiters' eyes fell on Bhawna who could fill one more vacancy in the company. Her newly discovered confidence and self-belief got her a job she hadn't even applied for. Today, she works as a human resource executive and helps companies by shortlisting candidate profiles for hiring. She plans to continue this work alongside securing a seat in desired government colleges for higher courses such as M.A or B.Ed.

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Imagine if I didn't know how to start a computer or was too timid to answer back in an interview, do you think an HR company would have hired me? In a small span of four months, SADRAG boosted my confidence to face the world and to believe firmly in my potential. It taught me pragmatic skills that are the building blocks of corporate ladder. I was transformed into a fearless girl ready to take on the world, all thanks to the guidance and support provided by SADRAG. Now I tell other girls to have faith in their own self and move on. I am surprised at the quantum of change in me. SADRAG showed me the way and I am following it diligently with the gained confidence to grow in my career. Sometimes, I wonder what if SADRAG was not in my life!

.....Bhawna

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Rajat

The Dream Of Wearing A Coiled Stethoscope Around Neck

An inspiring story of a young boy who learnt the courage to bounce back when life took away his only confidant.

On a gloomy day in January 2023, 16-year-old Rajat's (name changed for privacy concerns) life took a turn for the worse. A family of six living in a sub-urban area of Noida lost their eldest son in a tragic accident. The deceased was Rajat's eldest brother and his fondest confidant. The young man was selling clothes on a cart when a truck hit him to death. Since then, nothing has been normal about Rajat's home.

Rajat's story is one of revival and finding light amid darkness. This ordinary 16-year-old has not-so-ordinary dreams about life. He wishes to become a doctor in a family whose monthly income is not a figure more than 11000 INR. The story is about how this young man is navigating through loss and dream-shattering forces.

Clouds of gloom surround Rajat's home

Rajat's family hails from a small district in Aligarh. The family shifted to village Tughalpur in Greater Noida some five years back in search of good opportunities for making money. The family also has a daughter who was married off in 2017.

Rajat's family has no ancestral property to fall back on. Whatever little share they deserved to get was taken back by his grandmother.

After shifting to Greater Noida, the entire family found a common endeavour in working around cloth selling. While the father and deceased eldest son sold clothes on a cart, the mother assisted the family by working in a small unit of a textile-based company. His mother's job rendered some benefits like a health card that gave them access to government hospitals.

While the parents and eldest brother tried to meet ends, Rajat and his elder brother continued learning in a neighbourhood school. When tragedy hit the family in January 2023, Rajat was in class 9 and his elder brother was in intermediate. Following the demise of his brother, Rajat lost the person who believed in his dreams the most.

With the sudden passing away of the eldest son, the economic machinery of the household broke down. While the ailing father had to retire from work in the event of cardiac concerns, the mother couldn't recuperate from the loss and left her job.

Rajat's other brother had to take the economic burden on his shoulders. While studying, he also took up a job at an automobile repair workshop. The entire family thrives on the money he gets back home. Rajat is still too young to offer financial assistance to the family.

Understanding that education is the way forward, both Rajat and his brother Ajay didn't give up on school in the face of troubled times. Earning not more than 11000 INR, both continue to take out a meagre amount aside as their school fee.

An inspiring bond

Rajat and Ajay, his brother always looked upon their passed-on brother as their guide in life. Rajat took his demised brother as his true confidant who would fulfill all his needs. He pampered him with gifts and clothes now and then and used to patiently be an ear to all his aspirations. Losing him, Rajat had lost a father figure.

While Ajay has no choice but to hustle between studies and work, he wants a better future for Rajat.

When Ajay started to work at the automobile workshop, he saw the importance of upskilling. With the pressure on his shoulders, he couldn't dream of upskilling himself at that time but wanted Rajat to learn some survival skills which could fetch him easy jobs.

Clouds of gloom surround Rajat's home

Rajat and Ajay described how one day they saw the SADRAG-run Sarthak computer centre in their close vicinity and how it was providing free learning of basic computer operations with a package of life skills based livelihood training. They didn't know how it would help them later in life but saw it as an opportunity to learn something useful that could come in handy at any time. Hence, Rajat got enrolled in the course and his journey started with learning basic applications like MS Paint, making simple designs and how he gradually could work with MS Word, MS PowerPoint and MS Excel. Rajat was gradually learning new things. He used to often banter about the keys or computer operations he learnt at the centre.

A block that existed in Rajat's learning process was that he had no technological aid like a mobile phone or laptop to practice the skills he had been taught. There was only one phone in the house and Ajay used it. Rajat was doing well at the centre but in the present circumstances, he couldn't afford a gadget. So the moment he was back home, he kept on memorizing the functions learnt at the centre. He believed that the human mind is the most sophisticated gadget, it gets better and better with practice.

Computer savvy to become a doctor? Rajat joins the dots

At SADRAG centre, Rajat learnt many things about life other than computers. There were college interns and corporate volunteers from technical colleges who came and enlightened these youth on how the country's landscape had been changing in terms of competitive exams or work opportunities. Rajat and other youth enrolled at the centre came to know about various competitive exams and the preparation tactics for it. They were given career guidance to help them find their calling. Practical lessons on financial literacy and personality development were at the core of training. It is the time when Rajat found out that to get into medicine, one had to clear a national medical test and merit alone couldn't fetch him a seat in government college. Till then Rajat had no idea about NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test).

Learning more about finances at the centre, Rajat became aware that the first step to securing a medical seat in a good medical college was to have some saved resources that would help him navigate his path without anxiety for tomorrow. He realized that dreaming is not enough, one must have a practical plan to achieve those dreams. He knew that to afford even a tuition would require him to earn some money.

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The idea is to get out of this puddle of hopelessness. Medicine is a long journey and I know little about the process but one thing is clear I will need some economic backing as I tread on this difficult path. SADRAG was right when it said that learning computer skills won't make me a doctor but it will make me earn some money through small online jobs which will later take me to my goal. I can only take care of my needs and aspirations when I can earn a little for myself. Also, I have to take some burden off Ajay's shoulder. I am grateful to SADRAG for giving me this clarity.

.....Rajat

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Our not-so-ordinary young man has a vision

Despite life throwing sour lemons at Rajat, he hasn't forgotten to make lemonade out of it. He continues to develop habits and cultivates attitudes that make him a sure recipe for success.

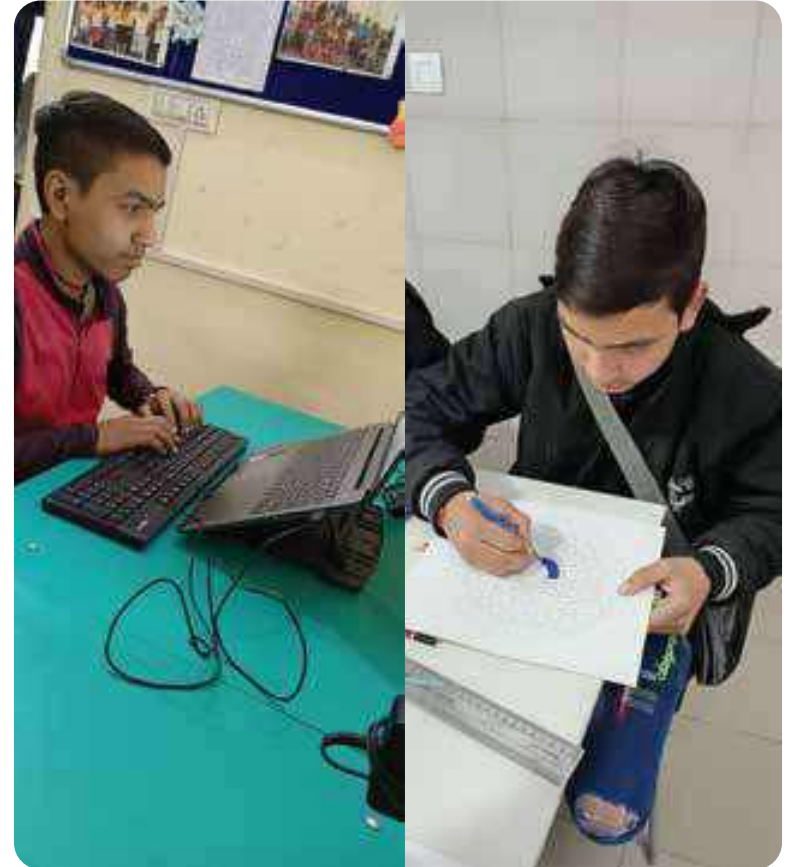
The 16-year-old starts his day with a brisk morning walk and never misses a class at the computer centre. He knows that good health, practice and consistency are the roads to big achievements.

Interestingly, Rajat's aspirations don't end with the limited desire to make more money. He wishes to become a doctor and aspires to revive the lost hopes of people.

Since very young he used to observe doctors very carefully, how they do their work and how they ignite hope in people who might be losing it. He always admired the surgeons, and how they revive a seemingly dead person. He feels there is nothing more joyful and admirable than that. He wishes to become someone's saviour someday.

Learning basic computer skills might not be a significant connection with Rajat's big dreams but it is a huge step in making his dreams realizable in a practical world. Today we see Rajat playing with keys, tomorrow we wish to see a coiled stethoscope around his neck while he is busy saving precious lives.

Rajat's journey has just begun. He is getting prepared for the long and tardy road ahead. Quite emotionally matured at this age, Rajat does understand that he would swing with the wind. He may have to change his goal but the lesson he has learnt is to Never Give Up! And keep navigating your way around your goal.





Santosh

Acing Interviews With
New Found Confidence

From learning how to introduce himself in a professional setting to working as a backend operator, Santosh has an inspiring story to tell.

Learning affects us in more than one way. It not only makes us world smart but also makes our personality more appealing to others. The same can be said for 24-year-old Santosh who transformed his demeanour into its most amiable form, attracting good work opportunities in a new city.

From lacking the confidence to interact with the world outside his hometown to clearing a job interview in one go, Santosh's story is a testimony of how upskilling and personality grooming can change the course of a person's life.

Migration was not a choice but a necessity

The childhood of Bihar-born Santosh was marked by poverty, debt and self-doubt. Born in Miya Bigha village of Nawada city in Bihar, Santosh had little to no exposure to life beyond his village and city.

He lived with his two sisters, a brother, his parents and other members of the joint family. Life at the ancestral house started to become difficult with Santosh's father earning a meagre amount by selling sarees on a bicycle. The poor financial stability resulted in multiple borrowings which later pressured the family to migrate to places where they could get opportunities to make more money to repay the debts. They looked for possible places where they could migrate to and lead a better life.

The silver lining was that despite the financial crunch, Santosh's parents wanted him to study. He was enrolled in a government school where he continued his schooling till class 6.

Noida: Not a promising beginning

In the year 2011, when Santosh was around 11 years of age, his family shifted to village Nawada in Noida in search of livelihood.. With increased expenses that involved living in a rented room for INR 3000, Santosh's mother decided to join his father's hand in supporting the family. While his father got a job as a waiter in a hotel, his mother started to work in a factory. However, things didn't begin on a promising note. Santosh's father's job was inconsistent as he got work only during events such as marriage and other functions. On the other hand, his mother was getting merely 50 paise for thread-cutting a piece of cloth at the factory. With all four children being very young, meeting two ends was difficult. However, Santosh's parents kept on pulling their work in the hope that one-day things would turn better. They wanted their children a better life. They understood that education and skilling were important to earn money so they never compromised on children's schooling. They got Santosh and his elder sister enrolled in a nearby school at the monthly fees of INR 200. Hence, Santosh didn't miss out on education even in the most challenging circumstances.

Need for grooming

Santosh had to change his school to study beyond class 8. He sought admission in Government Inter College to pursue his studies. However he faced hurdles in admission since he lacked confidence to talk and converse with other people. Somehow he got the admission and worked hard to be at par with others in the class.

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I often looked at others and wondered why he could not be as frank and open as them? Why did I hesitate to talk? I could not find answers to these questions till I found SADRAG to my rescue.

.....Santosh

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Santosh faltered in clear communication and had poor hold in languages, both Hindi and English. It took him good two to three years to get himself back into the competitive race. Those were bad times for him and he was often humiliated for unclear diction and command over the language. It hit his confidence down. When the confusion and unfamiliarity with the new curriculum started to fade away, Santosh's performance improved. He even jumped into some classes to sit with students of his age.

SADRAG came through hearsay

Santosh completed his intermediate from the neighbourhood government school. Following class 12, poor finances prompted him to take distance learning course at Delhi University. His father insisted that he continued his studies. They were afraid that Santosh may not leave studies and kept a watch on him.

While Santosh's academic life was growing, there wasn't much improvement in his self-confidence. Santosh's father wasn't oblivious to his son's poor self-esteem. One day coming back from work, he brought the pamphlet from the SADRAG-run STEP Centre which was providing a free three-month course on computer training and personality grooming. This was exactly what Santosh required at the time. He was promptly enrolled on the course.

The SADRAG centre was offering a comprehensive training program for youth. Santosh not only received training in basics of computer operations but also gained a lot of other useful skills. Financial literacy, the art of self-grooming, preparation for facing job interviews, the art of self-introduction, improving fluency in communication, and rectifying inappropriate gestures and postures in formal work spaces. The training had a significant impact on Santosh who started to take good care of himself, paying attention to how he came across in front of others. It groomed his personality and reduced his hesitation to start a conversation or answer back. He practised a lot and diligently followed each step of preparation with the help of trainers at the centre. He also gained practical wisdom on how to initiate professional conversations and solve problems pro-actively. Santosh could gradually feel a perceptible change in his personality. By the end of the training, he felt he was ready to face the world and sought opportunities to work in the industry.

Clearing interview in one go

SADRAG prepared Santosh for his first job. He was groomed and sent for an interview. He excelled in interview and got his first job in a finance company. He was appointed as a phone verification agent and was offered INR 13000 as his first salary. This was a moment of joy for him and his family. However gloomy days lied ahead. The pandemic engulfed the entire world, India was not to be unaffected. The precautionary lockdowns played havoc and the company was shut down. Santosh was aghast. The source of income for the family was discontinued.

When Santosh thought he was back again in the gloom, his newly discovered self-confidence made him crack an interview in one go. Santosh secured a role in backend operations in an IT company. His improved finances are a source of relief for his parents who were never so prouder of him.

Santosh continues to participate in personality grooming classes organised by SADRAG where he interacts and learns a new perspective from corporate volunteers and college interns. He dreams to be like them and improve his career prospects. The family is proud of Santosh since he is brining them out of deprivation inch by inch.

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I never knew that a three-month course can do greater wonders than 12 years of schooling. SADRAG not only showed me the way to become economically independent but it groomed me into this man who had no confidence to face the world. I didn't know how to switch on a computer. Neither I had the inner power to face an interview and get selected in the first go. I am more than grateful for what this organisation did for me.

.....Santosh

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