

Slum kids make it from signal to schools

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New Delhi: The first attempt was a dud. In June 2016, primary teachers Anshu Pathak and Manoj Kumar tried putting children of Sulahkul Vihar who begged at the traffic junctions in Dwarka into municipal schools. Their parents weren't just uninterested but were downright hostile. Pathak changed tack. Every time she saw the kids at the Sector 14 traffic lights, she handed out snacks and water. She finally got over 20 of them ready for school in August.

In the past year and a half, the duo has enrolled over a hundred previously out-of-school children — around 80 from Kabadi Basti (Matiala, Dwarka) and 42 from Sulahkul Vihar. They were identified and enrolled through South Delhi Municipal Corporation's NEEV campaign. But enrolling is only half the battle won.

Pathak and Kumar, who belong to a group of municipal and government school teachers called Akshar Gyan Abhiyan, go to lengths to ensure these kids don't drop out. They dedicate weekends and vacations to extra classes and summer camps amidst the accumulated refuse of hundreds of homes at Kabadi Basti. But, as the Sulahkul Vihar lot is fast discovering, extra classes aren't enough.

The Sulahkul Vihar slum is shared by two communities. One lot of shanties belongs to



Photos: Vipin



FROM DUST TO DESK: Around 80 children from Kabadi Basti and 42 from Sulahkul Vihar have been enrolled in schools

garbage pickers and sorters. The duo enrolled 18 from this group. The other community comprises those who clean ears and beg for a living. They were hesitant but were eventually won over, like their children, with "ration and kapda" and encouragement. Another 24 joined the list. Today, only four of 42 are attending school.

The Right to Education Act requires a primary school to be placed within a kilometre of every habitation. There isn't one for Sulahkul Vihar. The

closest municipal school — in Dwarka Sector 3 — requires children younger than 10 years to cross a major road with heavy traffic. Others are over 2km away. "There is provision in the RTE Act for transport if the school is too far but there's no policy decision from the government on it," observed lawyer-activist Khagesh Jha.

Pathak and Kumar must keep interest alive till the transport problem is solved. The community doesn't believe good things come to them and are easily disheartened. A week earlier they had received stationery and the blue shirts of municipal schools, purchased with donations. New clothes are rare, and Rijnes, who is to join Class I, wears his uniform at home. They want *basta* (bags) too. Most of the 24-odd kids Pathak readied have stopped begging at the traffic junctions. Ajay apparently did, and Rubina squealed on him: "Ye maangne gaya tha".

Kumar has spent the last one-and-a-half year trying to keep the 80 Kabadi Basti kids in school. "Around 45 of them are regular school-goers," he said. "The malik who owns the sorting business brought the others here to work from villages. I haven't been able to help them. The kids do want to study but are afraid." Both the teachers insisted that the parents too want to send their children to school. "The shopkeeper we bought notebooks from said we shouldn't bother because they would be sold off," said Pathak. "He was wrong."