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How a generation of young leaders is emerging from India's slums

February 5, 2015

By

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Children from the Salia Sahi slum in Bhubaneswar present a Charter of Demand asking for more street lights in their community. (Humara Bachpan photo)

DELHI, India — On a recent Sunday afternoon in the tightly packed slum of Narela at the edge of Delhi, a group of children sat on a bright green rug amid broken tiles, bricks and bits of wood, engrossed in an animated discussion about their neighborhood.

Hens and goats roamed around. Older women in the traditional Indian sari sauntered past. Plastic buckets, used to fetch water from the nearby standpost, lay stacked in a corner. A small child shrieked, trying to clamber aboard a push-cart. The children, roughly between the ages of 7 to 16, talked of the need for toilets, clean water, parks and street lights. The weekly meeting of their child club, known as Mannat, was in progress.

A visitor might ask why children would like to spend part of their weekend in a meeting instead of playing. One answer is because they don't have a playground nor any of the recreation facilities that more affluent children in India's cities take for granted.

But it's also because Mannat (which means "a wish" or "a vow") is part of a bold experiment playing out in cities across India. The idea is to organize children in impoverished areas and "resettlement colonies" such as Narela, where shack dwellers relocated by the government live in terrible conditions. The clubs are a forum to get them talking about how their neighborhoods could be more child-friendly, and to inspire them to take demands for change to municipal officials. Over time, it is hoped, a generation of young leaders will emerge from the slums, empowered to advocate for their communities.



**Members of a child club in Narela, a “resettlement colony” on the outskirts of Delhi.
(Patralekha Chatterjee)**

“Our families have been here for years,” says Shahnaz Khatoon, a 15-year old girl and member of Mannat. “We still don’t have any basic amenities — no toilets or piped water. Every day, we get up at the crack of dawn and walk long distances to fetch water. It is the same story every evening.”

Shahnaz has to make hard decisions. Each night she faces a choice between spending more time doing her homework or queuing up to fetch water from the public handpump in the neighborhood. Children get injured in all the pushing and shoving that goes on, she says. Family members take turns to fetch water, but when adults are still at work or busy with household tasks, it falls on the children to do the chore.

“The government talks about the “Swachh Bharat” (Clean India) campaign,” Shahnaz goes on. “But where is the cleanliness drive in colonies like ours? The local authorities don’t listen to the adults. Children have power. I believe things can change if we get together and voice our demands.”

Raising voices

It’s widely understood that India is facing an increasingly urban future. The country’s urban population is set to grow from 377 million to 600 million over the next decade and a half. Cities are the engines of India’s economic growth and the home of a growing middle class, with good schools, recreational facilities and health clinics for those who can afford it.

But Indian cities continue to be sites of some of the greatest disparities in health, education and other opportunities. According to the government’s “[Slums in India – A Statistical Compendium 2011](#),” one in eight urban dwellers between the age of 0 and 6 lives in a slum. While there is much talk these days of [Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s plans for “100 smart cities,”](#) the fate of the children of the urban poor does not figure much in the public discourse about the future of cities.

A campaign called [Humara Bachpan](#) is trying to change that. Over the past two years, the group says, it has organized 325 child clubs in more than a dozen cities across India, from Mumbai to Kolkata to Bangalore. More than 35,000 children, mostly between the ages of 7 and 16, have joined.

Humara Bachpan (it means “our childhood”) is hoping to get children’s voices to be heard by local officials. As the child clubs come together, Humara Bachpan fieldworkers identify the children who demonstrate leadership skills or a keen sense of how to communicate. As the children pinpoint neighborhood needs, Humara Bachpan works to get the young leaders an audience with the mayor. The victories are small and sometimes symbolic. But they send a message to government officials that kids need different things than grown-ups. They send a message to the children, too: You can’t make change happen unless you speak up.



Rupak Gowda, a member of the Ma Mangla child club in Bhubaneswar, addresses an audience for Road Safety Week. (Humara Bachpan photo)

The biggest results have come in Bhubaneswar, capital of the Odisha state in eastern India. Ninth-grader Jasmine Nissa told me by telephone about the time she and her friends from the Ma Mangla child club went to the city's mayor with complaints about two non-functioning street lights in their neighborhood.

"We told the mayor we cycled to and from our tuition classes in the evening," says Jasmine, referring to after-school classes increasingly common in India. "Without functioning street lights, it was dark and dangerous. He was forced to listen to us." The problem was fixed. Sixteen year-old Rupak Gowda, also a member of Ma Mangla, says the club's lobbying has prodded local authorities to install 30 street lights in a cluster of slums. A police outpost has also been promised.

Humara Bachpan and its allies are pushing at the national level, too. Last November, the [Bernard Van Leer Foundation](#) organized a conference in Delhi called [Small Children, Big Cities](#). During one of the workshops, children from the child clubs mixed with children from more affluent backgrounds. Left to themselves, the children, cutting across economic and social divides, demanded more or less the same things — safe water every day of the week, clean surroundings, safe public spaces and reliable public transport.

The keynote speaker was India's Urban Development Minister, Venkaiah Naidu. He acknowledged the problems urban children face, especially in slums. "Harsh urban realities"

are adversely affecting “brain development and perspectives” of young children, he said, particularly of the poor during early childhood. Naidu said the time has come for city master plans to incorporate specific chapters to meet the needs of young children.

‘We have rights too’

Mannat and ten other child clubs in Delhi are among the newest ones to start up. Mannat was established in September. Fieldworkers attached to Humara Bachpan started by hosting regular community meetings for both adults and children. Then came a showing of an animated film, “Meet Munna,” about a child living in a dilapidated slum who learns how to work collaboratively with other children and advocate for change.

The clubs aren’t all work and responsibility. The children play, draw put on shows and play games, with activities planned by age group. Through play — and among the older children, conversation — they come to see that the garbage-strewn neighborhoods and urban decay that they had earlier accepted as given do not have to be that way.

“Earlier, we were not so aware,” says 11-year old Sheikh Jamaal, an eighth grader. “When we were chased away from public parks, we thought that was simply the way things are. Now we know that we have rights too. Why should we be not allowed to play in a public park?”

He continues: “Our colony does not have toilets. The toilets in school are cleaned up only on the World Toilet Day. At home, we have to manage everything with just two buckets of water. I have to go without baths for days in a row. Because there is no toilet at home, I have to go to the field to ease myself. Even if it is dark and it means braving snakes. Why does it have to be like this?”



**Child-led advocacy yielded new street lights in the Salia Sahi slum of Bhubaneswar.
(Humara Bachpan photo)**

In an adjoining block, 12 year-old Neha Thakkar and her friends are members of another club called the Happy Child Club. Members meet regularly on the terrace of a local resident. The problems here are pretty much the same as the ones Shahnaz and Sheikh talk about. The children want clean lanes, street lights, clean water, and parks where they can play.

Manju Goel, a field worker with Humara Bachpan, says it is still early days but there are promising signs. The child leaders have mapped their neighborhoods. Every utility that is

non-functioning or needs to be mended is marked on the map with a cross. The final blueprint will be shared with local municipal councilors, urban planners and policymakers.

The children say the exercise has helped them to know their colony better. Neha says some of the children also use what they have learned at the child-club meetings at home and at school. “We had no dustbins in schools,” Neha says. “Children routinely littered the classroom. Now, we paint empty cardboard boxes with bright colors and use them as trash cans.”

Will the child clubs transform the long-neglected landscape of Delhi’s urban periphery? That would be a lot to ask of children. But it’s a critical first step toward starting a new kind of conversation about improving life for the urban poor. “It is easy to brush aside adults,” says Satish Kumar, an activist working with Humara Bachpan. “But shutting the door on children who are demanding basic facilities — that is going to be much tougher.”

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*As appeared in Citiscope/5.02.105/International/HBC