

[india \(/india-news/\)](#) [world \(/world-news/\)](#) [cities](#) [opinion \(/opinion/\)](#) [cricket \(/cricket/\)](#) [sports \(/sports-news/\)](#) [entertainment \(/entertainment/\)](#)

[lifestyle \(/lifestyle/\)](#) [business \(/business-news/\)](#) [tech \(/tech/\)](#) [education \(/education/\)](#) [whatnow \(/what-now/\)](#) [photos \(/photos/\)](#) [videos \(/videos/\)](#)

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Insights into a child ragpicker's life

When Neetu Sharma-Joshi, education director, Navjyoti, our NGO, called a meeting of ragpickers about a week ago, little did she realise that it might well be a new phase in her ever-expanding project of education of children from resettlement colonies in West Delhi.

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When Neetu Sharma-Joshi, education director, Navjyoti, our NGO, called a meeting of ragpickers about a week ago, little did she realise that it might well be a new phase in her ever-expanding project of education of children from resettlement colonies in West Delhi.

Here is the narration of this amazing experience in her own words.

Though there were some facts known earlier about the ragpickers in the area but what I saw and heard made all of us realise that there is a long way to go.

A meeting of ragpickers was called as a result of stakeholders' interaction a few days ago to explore the feasibility of a waste management project to be implemented in Bawana area in West Delhi with ragpickers as the main force.

The moment one of the team members said that the ragpickers had arrived, I went upstairs to meet them. Here I saw a group of young children sitting amid grown-up ragpickers. Children were between the age of seven and 16. The first thing I thought was that these children must be school dropouts.

My first question was, "How many of you have dropped out from school?" "No one, ma'am, only these two," said a slim boy, who must be about 10. "What?" I exclaimed. "All of you go to school?" "Yes ma'am," they replied in chorus. "Then why are you into ragpicking and when do you get time for all this?" "We don't do it every day but only when we need money," said another boy.

"What do your parents do?" I asked. "They go to factories," replied the boy. So why do you do ragpicking?" I asked. "Because sometimes we need money," he said. "But for what?" I wondered. An elderly man sitting in the group said, "They don't give money to their parents but spend it on themselves for buying drugs, solution, biddi, etc." A complete silence followed.

I asked them, "Who all smoke or eat gutka or sniff solution?" They started pointing to one another. I understood that it was an issue. I asked if any of them was coming to Navjyoti remedial education, There was no one. I asked if they would like to learn computers. They replied in the affirmative.

“Do you want to learn drawing and sports?” They got excited.

I told them that only those children who would start coming regularly from now on would be given a chance to learn computers, art and sports. They agreed. I did not share about waste management project with them, which we had in mind, as they would now be linked to education. After they left, a plan for mapping other adult ragpickers was made with the group. Two scrap dealers who were present in the meeting were asked to map all the children as well as adult ragpickers separately so that specific plans of intervention could be made for them.

But the best was these children hearing Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s speech on Teacher’s Day along with hundreds of other schoolchildren in our project. They heard the PM talk about “lost childhood”. They now wanted it back. Navjyoti will work towards ensuring they do get it back as they stand enrolled in the remedial school. But we wonder how many millions may not be in such a situation.

Key insights

We generally feel that by ensuring enrolment of children in school, we have done our bit. However, when children become irregular, little attention is paid by schoolteachers to understand the reasons. We as teachers are not curious to know what children do after school, especially, if both parents are working long hours. And if some children are spending money where are they getting it from? Do their parents know? Teachers are not playing a ‘parenting’ role in addressing certain needs of children, nor do parents have any control over the deviant activities of children.

Peer influence, easy money and no societal control is leading them to drugs, for which again there is no monitoring.

The only way to prevent this is to have a foolproof plan of engagement of these children in productive activities throughout the day. Navjyoti’s remedial and gurukul project, which is peer-driven, does persistent work to ensure that children of the area, throughout the day, are joyfully involved in group activities of learning, growth, play, care and protection. While working with children, we realise that India faces extraordinary challenges to ensure every child’s time is accounted for. It calls for a huge time investment. Miles to go, fellow Indians!

(The writer is a former IPS officer and a Magsaysay award winner. Views expressed are personal)

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editorials (/editorials/)

authors (/authors/)

cities

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