

Education in a बढ़ी हुई इच्छा

I found the Indian ethnography I studied at LSE fascinating, and after graduating in 1984 I went to India and travelled for several months. The teaching of Professor Jonathan Parry on Varanasi's funeral priests and Professor Chris Fuller on the temple system of Madurai, and their explanations of religion, caste and class in India, were the start of a lifelong learning process for me.



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In 2003 I visited the slum communities around the airport in Delhi and came face to face with the dilemma facing modern India, where rapid development has done little to change the lives of the poorest 20 per cent of the nation. Education is fundamental to that dilemma. School attendance is low and drop out rates remain high in the poorest sector of society. Most state schools teach only in Hindi, which excludes students from getting professional jobs. Only through greater equality in education will the poorest communities participate in the benefits of shining India. Widespread

helped. She is 13 years old and wants to be a lawyer. She lives with her parents and four of her brothers and sisters in the Nasirpur slum, in one room with a low corrugated ceiling. Asha Kumar, the founder of Saakshar, spoke to Anita's parents about how their children's education will help them financially, and now they are keen to let Anita finish her studies and get established in a job before she gets married. Anita's family and all her neighbours, along with the other 200 children currently attending Saakshar, are Scheduled Caste – what used to be Untouchable.

illiteracy, low social status and low self confidence, mistrust of authority and the need to work long hours cleaning or labouring mean that children are not sent to school, but left to wander the streets, to care for siblings, or taken to work.

Back in India this Easter I spent two weeks photographing a project for slum children in Delhi which tackles non-attendance and drop out head on. Saakshar ('literate') rents three small rooms where a total of 100 children are prepared for mainstream school each year, and 100 receive support and encouragement after being 'mainstreamed'. With school attendance rising from 33 per cent to 70 per cent in six years, children and parents are all smiling.

Anita Paswan is one of the children they first

I asked Anita what difference education would make for her future marriage. She answered that uneducated girls are treated badly by their mother-in-law for being stupid. An educated girl will get a better husband, she said, an educated man who is understanding will love her and respect her parents. After a year of preparation from Saakshar, Anita moved to mainstream school five years ago and



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Anita Paswan in the one room Nasirpur slum she shares with her parents and four of her siblings

this year she came highest in her year group in her exams. She would love to be a lawyer, but her parents cannot pay to send her to a school where she would get an education in English. 'What to do?' asks Asha Kumar. A volunteer has offered to start teaching Anita English, but will it be enough? And what about the nine million others who still get no education at all? ■

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The Saakshar School Appeal is raising money to help Saakshar get slum children in Delhi into school, see <http://saakshar.chch.ox.ac.uk>