

Neelu has always been a quiet sincere girl. She would never draw anyone's attention by insisting or demanding anything. She would slip in and learn when and how, never giving trouble typical of all the other girls of her batch.

As the eldest sibling, about 8 years old, when Muskaan started working in her basti, she had many household responsibilities on her. Her younger sister, Pooja, would come and study in the centre run in the basti. As Pooja progressed and took on the role of a student, the work burden on Neelu increased. Her mother, Jamuna then was still bearing children, and would be incapacitated for long stretches. It was Neelu who managed the house.



Pooja started going to school; so did their two other siblings. Neelu continued to come to the Muskaan centre as and when she could take out the time from her work. Collecting wood for cooking, filling up water from the hand-pump, waiting for the daily earnings to come in to be able to buy the rice and masalas for the evening meal... cooking becomes a much bigger task with all pre-requisites missing in a typical Gond household in Ganga Nagar Basti.

Neelu was much later enrolled in a government school in class 5 directly. The only child from the basti in the class, she persevered and finished her 5th three years after her younger siblings. She could not clear her Class 8th Board examinations in the first attempt, and was very disappointed. She says, 'I always study and try very hard, and am very worried when I go in for an examination. But I know I have to sit and try to write as much as I can. If I don't fare well, then I become very sad. I don't want to show the result to anyone and feel very upset. But if it is good, then I feel like going and sharing this with my parents and everyone.' Recognizing that she has put in her best, she was encouraged to continue her studies not caring about the result. She started living in the Muskaan hostel to be able to study with less distractions, and in two years time, she sat for her 10th Board through the Open University and then joined school and cleared her 12th in Science.

Neelu wants to join the medical field. She is studying for the medical entrance examinations. If she had her ST certificate, she would manage her admission easily. But getting a certificate made honestly is impossible for the children in her basti. A tribal migrant with no land records or documentary proof of their residence of 1950 has no chance of getting an ST certificate and availing of the benefits mandated for them.

Neelu's father goes to the labour pick-up point to find digging work for the day. He often has to come back empty-handed. Her mother, Jamuna, is an enterprising woman and takes up whatever jobs come her

way. Neelu broke her childhood engagement three years back, but even now, her community elders keep persuading her to get married.

Neelu writes that she is very unsure of how her life would go ahead and that she'll need to compromise with her dreams. She says she could settle in for any job that could help her earn and support her parents, but she earnestly wants to become a doctor so that she can support communities as where she comes from. Even though they live in the city centre, she has seen many children die for lack of money and medical care.

Chandni.

I live in Ganga Nagar, Bhopal. My father does mazduri and my mother lives at home. My brother and sister study in Muskaan, and one younger brother is married and goes to work.

In my childhood, I used to go for waste-picking with my friends. We would buy whatever we wanted from the money we got from selling the scrap. I didn't do much work at home. My mother would do all the work, and I would help sometimes. But I always went to collect the wood needed for cooking.

All of us friends would together see a film at my grandmother's (Shanti Aaji). She would charge us Re. 1 and we would get to see the films. And we would always be playing, and roaming around. I would play games of touching the stone with the stick, gilli danda, gola, cards. We would be busy all the time. We didn't know how to read, nor could we speak hindi. We only knew Gondi because that is what we used to speak.

One day, our teacher came and met everyone in the basti. She started speaking about our work and our life with our Aaji and all the children. She started coming everyday and we became friends. Didi started teaching all of us. Initially we didn't have any place to study. Aaji used to run the scrap shop, and all the children used to sell the scrap to her only. When Aaji saw that the children were not studying because they were going for scrap-picking, she closed down her shop. Now the children didn't go for work as much and Aaji would have the class conducted in the place from where she ran the shop. Aaji would send all the children to study and would beat up the child who would not go to study. All the



Shanti Aaji, Chandni's Grandmother

children started studying everyday, and I also started studying earnestly. All the children together thought of naming our school 'Muskaan'; there was a small child in our basti whom we all loved and her name was 'Muskaan', so we took her name for the school.

Now, we would all study and play in 'Muskaan' for hours together. Earlier we would come to the class without having a bath. Our neighbours would keep complaining. So one person in the school began to scrub us properly and give us a bath. She would put oil and comb our hair. Very soon, we were enrolled in a school and we started going to school happily.

I remember the first day we went to school and when the bell rang, we all picked up our bags to go home. The teacher told us this was only the end of the period. I also remember the times when my friend's mother (Kochai Aaji) would bring us rice in a big bowl and all of us would come out in the grounds and eat there. We did not carry our tiffins because there was no food cooked at home in the morning, and we



felt awkward carrying our previous night's rice. All our parents were happy when they saw us wearing the school uniform. When any one of us didn't go to school, Shanti Aaji would scold us and beat us up.

We used to go to Saraswati School. We used to like going to school, but didn't like it when the teacher would hit us. We came and told our didi in Muskaan and she went to speak to the teacher. She explained to the teacher that the children would stop coming to school if they were beaten up there and that they found some things new because it was the first time they were going to a school. We would go to Muskaan after the school, and play there and also have fun. We would do plays together, and go out to parks etc.

I used to study well, and also have fun with my friends. My parents have always supported me and have never told me not to study. They would always tell me to go to school; I only used to bunk when I didn't feel like going. We were enrolled in another school in class 6. There were some good teachers there, and some bad teachers. The teachers there would always scold us that we have not come clean, we have not had a bath. The teacher would hit us also. Therefore some children stopped going to school. The women from the basti

went together to speak to the School Principal about it. Everyone explained it to the teacher that she should not hit the children. Soemtimes, the children would hide somewhere and not go to the school. Bhaiya, from Muskaan, would look for each one of us and send us to school. Aaji would also get very angry if we missed school. I used to go to school, study but also skip it often.

There were many difficulties in our basti. Girls would be married off at young ages. People drink a lot, gamble and fight. Sometimes I didn't feel like staying in the basti. But what could I do? In spite of all these situations, I kept studying. Several friends got married. I didn't want to; I used to think that if I got

married at this age, I won't be able to do anything else; I would get lost in the responsibilities of the house. My parents were also very good in that respect. They never forced me to marry, and would let me go wherever I wanted.

When I reached class 8, five of us were sent to a boarding school near Indore. My parents also did not object; they could see it was becoming difficult for us to study from home. But we missed home a lot. We didn't like it there at all; we would cry and insist that we wanted to come back. We refused to go back after the Diwali holidays, but Didi and Bhaiya (of Muskaan) fooled us in taking us for a holiday and left us back in school. We cursed them a lot, but I anyhow finished class 8 with 73%. This was the first time when we had been separated from home for so long.

We were happy when we got back and decided to study earnestly from home only. We joined another government school in class 9. They didn't teach well in the school, and we also became careless in going to school. We started running even when Didi would come from Muskaan because they would always tell us to go to the school. In three months, the school struck out our names because of low attendance. We just left our studies. We were also grown up by then, and our parents and everyone in the community also started insisting that we should now get married. One of the girls from our batch got married. Two of us also agreed to getting engaged during this period.

Then we again started going to Muskaan regularly. Because of our age and our freedom with our male teachers in Muskaan, people started speaking badly of us. My two friends were being severely pressurized to marry and they managed to negotiate themselves out of the situation with great care and determination. Everyday, there would be a fight at somebody's house.

We girls have come ahead with many difficulties. Many of our friends got left out on the way. Though not academically, but they have tried to maintain their space and dignity in their lives in different ways. Most of the boys also got involved in working for a living. In this turmoil, it was decided to start a hostel within Muskaan for us to be able to continue our studies. But this did not stop the pressure from our larger community. It is only the girls who have strongly stood their ground that they have been able to pursue their studies.

There have been some changes in the basti since then. Many more children from our basti are studying now. Many parents send the children to study themselves. But still the girls are getting married at young ages only.

I have always wanted to study and have managed to do so. Things are changing for us; we have learnt many new things. I went to Delhi also for a month's internship at Teen Murti Bhawan and made many more friends there.

My engagement also got canceled because of several reasons, and I also told my parents not to ask me to marry. They have not insisted after that. My friends have had more problems. My parents answer back to anyone in the community who makes any allegations about us. I am very proud of them; they say that our daughter would take up a job one day.

Once, someone in our basti had died. He had fallen in the gutter when he had gone for toilet, and had drowned in it. Everyone was very scared, and they felt that they could see his ghost. I was very worried

about my parents then. Nobody would sleep in their houses. My father also went away. My mother also became unwell. But I was in the midst of my examinations and couldn't help her out much and felt very upset.

I have cleared my class 12th. I appeared for the PET examination and cleared it also. But during the counseling, I was told that my tribal certificate would not work. I lost my strength. I felt very upset. I had no major dreams of becoming an engineer; I had reached this level because of the different people in Muskaan and my parents. They had all seen this dream for me. I had told my mother that I had cleared the examination and was getting admission in a big college. She was very happy. The counseling people were also very sensitive towards me and said that they would hold on to the seat for me if I could even get a letter from the Collector that my file was under process. We hurried to him and told him our difficulty, but he did not give any concrete response, and said it would be sent for investigation. I was not able to join college then.

I told my mother that I had not got the admission because we did not have a tribal certificate which was from Madhya Pradesh even though I as well as my mother had been born here. Our ancestors had been moving from one place to the other wherever they got work, and there was no documentary proof of their existence in 1950 (the cut-off year). So while we are tribal and we speak Gond, and we look Gond and we follow our customs and traditions, we don't have a record to prove that we existed anywhere in the country in 1950 and therefore not able to make a certificate. My mother was very disheartened but I anyhow managed to soothe her. There were many people to give me courage, so how could I lose courage. I kept up my spirits and we decided to take up the matter in the court.

The case is still pending in court, but the interim orders were in my favour and I took up admission in the national institute of technology the following year after giving the AIEEE. I am now studying electrical engineering. The fees here is quite high and I am also writing to people directly because I realize it is not possible for Muskaan to bear my expenses always. There are many other children who still have not got their primary education. I am eligible for scholarship, but it has not come through yet. And I am not even sure of whether it would or not because I still don't have a permanent certificate.

Madhu

I live in Gautum nagar Basti in Bhopal. We live on a square plot of land, with about 60 households living in a space less than 2500 feet.

We are Ojha Gond people; our families come from areas of Betul and Sarni, and would sing and ask for alms. Some of our relatives work in the colliery in Sarni. They started coming to Bhopal for work; the men would do tin repair work but that was not enough and our mothers



and children started waste-picking. This has become the main source of our earnings.

As nobody in our community had ever been formally educated, we also were not put in schools. All the children would go for picking up scrap in the nearby colonies and market area. We would also beg outside the cinema and the chaat shops in the area.

I feel very bad because many people don't talk to us properly. The rich don't understand us; they don't understand the difficulties of being poor. We don't have much money even though we work hard. We are not able to buy proper shoes, or nice clothes. We can't even complain to anyone. I feel I am poor when I am not to help another person who needs something. I feel I am poor when people say what kind of people you are, you stay dirty, you all beg, you send your children to work, you can't do this, and you can't do that. In front of us only, they insult our parents. When it rains, it becomes worse in the basti, and our houses start leaking and the clothes and bedding becomes wet and we feel cold and hungry. But if we go and stand in the porch of other people's houses for protection, then they try to send us away. If you go in a bus, then they will make space for a rich-looking person but not for someone like us. If we go to buy something in a shop, then even though we would be carrying the money to pay, they would not give us attention if someone economically better-off than us comes after us also. But a poor person understands this very quickly. We begin to kill our desires.

In the basti, all of us get entangled in the household work and the need to earn and go for waste-picking work early in the morning. If we get late in going, then someone else picks up the things before us or the Municipal Corporation tanker takes it away. There is no place to study, and everyone is doing something else and we are not able to sit quietly and study. Children get addicted to the whitener and tobacco, and keep finding ways to earn money for that. Water comes every second day only, and can't have a bath properly. We can't even sit peacefully when we go to the toilet, and have to keep getting up in between also because someone or the other will harass us. In the basti, we just learn to live under pressures of all sorts and compromise with everything.



Madhu, as a kid, on the right with her friends Jyoti and Kabbi

I started coming to study in Muskaan, but was not regular. Since my elder brother had not been able to finish even class 5th when he got married, they all felt I also won't be able to manage. My father would keep taunting me that I had not learnt anything. But I was learning in Muskaan, and I finished class 5th and joined school then. I started staying in the hostel so that I could be more regular in school.

I love going back home. My mother and father both pamper me when I go back because I don't stay there always. My mother cooks something special for me and I like it when all of us eat together. I have two

younger brothers and two sisters. I am attached to many people in the basti because we all understand each other. We speak about different things. I also go and work in the printing press for a few hours on these holidays; we get Rs. 8 per hour and I can save up money for new clothes then.

Now I am in class 9th. I have continuously absented myself from school, sometimes for 2 – 3 weeks and just not gone back to the hostel. I do this when I don't enjoy the school and the teachers begin to 'label' you, or when I need money and don't have anything for buying my toiletries. And then I just get used to being out of school. But I then again have to firm up my mind.

I like to study and I like to work also. I feel I should not waste any part of my day. I like to speak to my friends and work at home. I have never had a boyfriend in my life because I want to move ahead and I know that this would spoil things for me. My studies will get left out and I don't want unnecessary tensions. Therefore I try to concentrate on my work and studies and friends and family. I want to be able to think properly so that I can communicate and explain myself to others. And I can also listen and learn from others.

I have learnt a lot in Muskaan. I have understood what it means to be a woman. I have begun to dream of another way of life; I know of my rights; I don't feel scared any more.