

## **Gopi, Rahul and Biskarma**

Gopi, Rahul and Biskarma are 16 year old boys from the Gond community who live in Bagh Mughaliya where Muskaan runs a learning centre. All 3 boys currently work as day labourers, waiters at wedding events or as street cleaners. They don't have a fixed job and it fluctuates depending on the season and their availability. Two of them attend some form of schooling regularly and work during the holidays. One attends Muskaan's learning centre while the other is enrolled in a government school and is in Grade 5.

All of them worked as waste-pickers up to the age of 10 after which the job felt demeaning to them due to the filth and stench they had to endure. They also used to fall ill due to the unhygienic working conditions and often did not take a bath for many days. They used to give their earnings to their parents but now they keep some money for their personal expenditure on clothes and give the rest to their mothers to run the house.

The boys feel it is not necessary for children to work but often circumstances are such that there are 8 mouths to feed in a family plus marriage and medical expenses add to the cost of living, thus compelling children to help their families. They blame people for having large families then not being able to afford the expenses.

“We will only have 2 children each so that we can support our families adequately without requiring our children to work. We will send our children to school so that they can get good jobs later in life.

“Although we did not have a pleasant experience in government schools mainly due to the constant beatings from teachers, things are starting to change now and there are some good government schools around which also incentivise children to attend by giving them food and money. Beatings have also reduced in schools now.”

None of the boys inhaled whitener or took any form of drugs even when they used to waste-pick. They claim nobody in their basti does such things as it is bad for health but most people consume alcohol regularly, including children.

“Our parents were never in favour of them waste-picking as it was a dangerous job with a high risk of injury. But since our friends were waste-picking and we didn't like staying at home nor going to school, we followed our friends as the income from waste-picking funded our gutka addiction. We would get very frustrated though because the police would always accuse us of stealing because we are from the Gond community even though we are innocent.”

They say currently only about 5% of children in their basti waste-pick while the majority either stay at home or attend school. They feel in order to tackle the issue of child labour, the government should stop the sale of gutka, alcohol, beedi etc and ensure schools have proper facilities such as functioning toilets and dedicated good teachers.

“Many children prefer to work because they want to finance their addictions and school is often not a practicable option if they need to run home each time they need to use the toilet or endure mindless beatings from teachers who fail to teach properly.”

They say most girls are not allowed to leave the house even to attend school as parents don't see the value in educating their daughters. Girls are usually kept at home to do the housework and married off when they turn 15. The boys feel it is important for girls to be educated so that they can stand up for themselves and put up a fight against child marriage. Though the girls are not allowed to work outside, the boys insist that girls have a tougher life as they are required to carry water, bring firewood, cook and do all the housework while boys have the luxury of not going to work if they don't feel like it and can set their own work hours.

The boys see their role in bringing about changes to the community's mindset of child marriage and children preferring to work instead of studying by being role models themselves.

“If we study and secure good jobs, the community will push their children to be like us. Similarly, a few girls need to refuse early marriage and complete their education and this will encourage other girls to do the same. We have to lead by example.”