

# A school for slum children

Om Foundation School is run like any other public school, with neat and clean surroundings, well-equipped labs and a library

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Going through the narrow alleys of village Hoshiarpur you come across a big iron gate. Open it and you find a stark difference between the two worlds, one that exists outside this gate and the one that's inside it.

Outside are narrow drains overflowing with dirty water and barefoot children with running noses moving around. Inside you see neatly dressed children with bags going to their classrooms.

Welcome to the Om Foundation School. The school was started in 2002 by a Noida-based NGO, Om Foundation, for the underprivileged children from the urban slums.

Beginning with just two teachers and 20 children eight years back in village Morna, the school today has 213 students who are taken care of and educated by 14 teachers. The children are not just given education but also there healthcare and nutrition is taken care of, all free of cost.

Though a free school for children whose annual family income is less than Rs 4,000, it is like just another public school, with neat and clean surroundings, well-equipped science and mathematics laboratories and a library that has over 4,000 books.

It is run in a professional manner, beginning at 9 am with morning prayers and ending at 3 pm. The students are also given a midday meal, the food being prepared in the school kitchen.

Significantly, the school doesn't take more than 20 children in each academic year. "We admit children at the nursery level, though there are some admissions against vacancies in other classes. But we make sure that we keep the class strength to 25 in each class till Class 5, and 30 in Class 6 and 7," says headmistress Anju Garg.

"Since the parents of these

children belong to the labour class, are rickshaw-pullers, maids, masons, apart from academic learning they also need a lot of personal care which won't be possible if we increase the student strength," she says.

For all-round development of children, the school also runs a mentorship programme, especially for slow learners.

"We are recognised by the UP Board. Till now we have recognition till Class 10. We are looking for a bigger space so that we can get recognition till Class 12," says the managing trustee of the foundation Sanjay Drabu.

"The beginning was tough. We went around villages Ghijhod, Bhangel, Hoshiarpur, Nithari Sadarpur, Khoda, Chijarashi, Chalera, etc and the slum clusters of different sectors to find non-school going kids. But at almost each place we were met with opposition. It took a great deal to convince the parents of our motives," says assistant project director Sunita Ganju.

"Now the situation is such that they don't let their child take leave even for a day. At our parents-teacher meetings we have 94% turnout," she adds.

## STRESS ON GIRL CHILD EDUCATION

The NGO takes care that only one child per family is taken. And stress is given to education of the girl child. "The idea is to reach out to as many families as possible," says Dr Shukla.

The five who run the school are Sanjay Drabu, Anju Garg, Sunita Ganju, Krishnendu Sengupta and Dr RD Shukla.

Dr Shukla, an educationist retired from NCERT, is the academic advisor for the school.

"Funds come from a variety of sources like friends and families. But our major funding partner is British Gas," says Drabu.

"We specifically picked up this school since we were captivat-



■ The science and mathematics laboratories are well-equipped. The students are also given a midday meal, the food being prepared in the school kitchen.

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ed by their passion, commitment and vision. We cover running costs of the school and enable the school to be run with high quality staff and facilities," says Peter Parsons, head of business development (credit and operations), British Gas.

"Our people who visit India do volunteering activity with the children such as sports days, sometimes taking lessons, sharing experiences of the United Kingdom. We also have sent out apprentice engineers to the school who have undertaken flooring and painting activities," he adds.

## ALSO ON THE ANVIL

A skill development programme,



■ The children come to school neatly dressed with proper school bags.

Eitasha, for Class 10 passouts. These students will be trained in jobs for BPO industry, retail and hospitality sector. The programme will begin in December

during after-school hours.

A tailoring school for mothers of the students. This is being run in partnership with Rotary Club East Delhi.



**My father is a mason and mother a maid. I never thought my dream of getting education would ever materialise. I want to become a doctor.**

SULEKHA PRASAD, one of the first students



**I want to become a police officer. My father is a painter and mother a maid. If it wasn't for this school, I could have never thought of education.**

STEPHAN JOHN COLE, Ghijhod Village