Adolescence
An Age of Opportunity
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Today, 1.2 billion adolescents stand at the crossroads between childhood and the adult world. Around 243 million of them live in India. As they stand at these crossroads, so do societies at large – the crossroads between losing out on the potential of a generation or nurturing them to transform society. As adolescents flourish, so do their communities, and all of us have a collective responsibility in ensuring that adolescence does in fact become an age of opportunity.

In India adolescents, young people between the ages of 10 and 19, account for nearly one quarter of the total population. They deserve our attention as they hold the key to breaking entrenched cycles of poverty, inequity and deprivation. Children who are marginalized or poor are less likely to transition to secondary education and are more likely to experience violence, abuse and exploitation.

Thanks to investments in early and middle childhood, between birth and age nine, the lives of many young children have been saved and in many cases improved significantly. We cannot risk losing these children as they become adolescents.

Available data show that millions of adolescents today do not enjoy access to quality education, basic, sexual and reproductive health care, support for mental health issues and disability, protection from violence, abuse and exploitation, and forums for active participation.

Vital areas in which all of us therefore need to come together and invest include creating a supportive environment for adolescents, fostering forums for youth participation, investing in education and training, tackling poverty and inequity, and improving data collection and analysis.

Adolescents today face a unique set of challenges, including an escalating number of humanitarian crises and conflicts, climate change and environmental degradation and rapid urbanization. With these challenges expected to intensify over the next decade, adolescents will need to be equipped with the ability and knowledge to contend with their impact.

This booklet puts together a collection of stories about adolescents who are rising to the challenge and benefitting from programmes which provide them with skills and knowledge and foster youth engagement.

These adolescents inspire us with their honesty, courage and commitment. But there is still much more that we need to do. Together, we must prepare the next generation of leaders and give them the skills and courage to move India forward.

Karin Hulshof
Representative
UNICEF India
Children create a riotous symphony of colour and movement as they play in a Bal Bhavan, where they are encouraged to express their creativity.
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INVEST IN ADOLESCENTS

Vocational Training Lifts Adolescents Out of Poverty
Girls Learn Life Skills in Deepshikha
VOCATIONAL TRAINING LIFTS ADOLESCENTS OUT OF POVERTY

I know who I am, and I will continue to go out and work. For myself, I am doing it to stand on my own feet. For my family, I want to help my father all my life.

— Noorjahan Mansoori Khan, 17
Each class of about 100 young people are selected based on a series of risk factors including whether they have a disability, are from a slum community, or a Scheduled Caste or Schedule Tribe. About two thirds of them complete each course and get a job. Each candidate is given an aptitude test to judge whether they would best fit in the service, computing or welding sectors.

Noorjahan met many of the criteria and stood out from the crowd immediately. “I saw a will in her that she wanted to do something,” Mahesh Chandra, one of the teachers, says of Noorjahan, who was forced to drop out of school after class eight. “She herself came up and said: I want to study further. How can you help me do that?”

Noorjahan’s parents though needed to be convinced. “Her mother was very afraid: She’s a girl and cannot go out alone,” Chandra recalls. “So we said: Look at the life you have been leading so far. Is this the life you want for your daughter?”

In this conservative society, women are expected to remain at home, explains Nupur Pande, Child Protection Officer in the UNICEF Uttar Pradesh office.

“Men are out in troupes on construction jobs or looking for work or at vending stalls,” Pande says. “We must empower women, because they have to become decision-makers. They are at home, and they are teaching children.”
**Girls face obstacles**

The Khan family lives in one of the 342 *mohallas* that dot the city of Moradabad, where nearly half the population live below the poverty line. Their home is without electricity or toilet facilities. An open grill emits a murky, dim light from the open sky above.

Khan attended school up to the tenth grade and realizes the value of getting an education. “But when money is tight, I’m not able to make the children’s school fees. Whatever I used to earn, I would pay for her schooling,” he explains. “Fifty or sixty rupees a day is just not enough. I thought if she could go to the training centre she could get a job.”

The situation in India is particularly grim for girls, who are considered *paraya dhan* or property of the family into which they will marry. Hence, girls’ education may often not be valued as it is seen as an investment whose returns will be reaped by another family.

**Resisting pressure to drop out**

Noorjahan is a beautiful girl with delicate features, her long wavy hair clasped in a ponytail atop her head. She wears a flowered dress and a silver hoop glints from her nostril. She wrings her hands nervously as she speaks about the torment the men in her community are putting her through.

“They trouble me a lot when I go to work and ask me where I am going. The neighbours who are living around here make my life miserable when I am going out of the house,” she says. “It hurts me. I feel a lot when I listen to all this, but I know who I am, and I will continue to go out and work. For myself, I am doing it to stand on my own feet. For my family, I want to help my father all my life.”

Her parents decided to ignore the neighbours disparaging their daughter’s character as the 2,000 rupees Noorjahan makes helps lift the family out of abject poverty.

“I feel bad, I feel sad, and I feel angry,” her mother says. “I know my daughter. I have full confidence in her, and I know that she is not how they are saying she is.”

Noorjahan was one of six trainees who was tried out at shipping document company KK Gupta and Associates, but only she was offered a fulltime position. The company believes that the vocational programme allows young people to develop contemporary business skills, especially computer literacy.

But her co-workers weren’t always so kind, teasing her about her weak English. The pressure finally got to her, and she dropped out. However, rather than falling through the cracks, UNICEF intervened, negotiating that Noorjahan would sharpen her skills at the vocational training centre each morning before continuing on to work.

> We must empower women, because they have to become decision-makers. They are at home, and they are teaching children. — Nupur Pande, UNICEF Child Protection Officer
GIRLS LEARN
LIFE SKILLS IN
DEEPSHIKHA

I’m a girl. I will shine like a star...
and I will spread light on the earth.

— Deepshikha song
In each village, the programme trains a teenaged-girl volunteer to be *prerika* or facilitator. With 20 days of games and activities interspersed with knowledge on various issues, the young woman learns how to motivate and instruct girls in her own village. Then she runs hour-long meetings five times a week, passing on this knowledge and encouraging their dreams.

Certainly, Pratibha and three of her friends are already dreaming. A few months ago, they realized many women in their remote village of Ukharda, population 586, don’t have the time or means to travel 20 kilometres to the next town to buy a *salwar kameez* (Indian suit). So they pooled their own savings, hopped on a bus and bought 15 suits of various designs. Later, they charged about 25 rupees more per suit and soon earned a nice profit.

Proudly, Pratibha shows a neatly-kept balance book. With the help of Barclays Bank, which donates 2,000 rupees of seed money to each *Deepshikha* group, these girls have already saved 8,000 rupees.

They’re learning valuable lessons in budgeting and entrepreneurship. And they are handing out loans as well.

One girl’s family couldn’t afford the 1,000 rupees school enrolment fee for their daughter, so she borrowed from the group and paid it back with interest after about six months.

Down another one-lane bumpy road, past bursting cotton fields and waving corn, Tejaswini Telang, 17, says life hadn’t changed much in her small village of Kadi until recently.
“The cities are changing but villages are the same,” she says. “Girls are of lower status and are only of use between the kitchen and family breeding. Nothing beyond that.”

Like most villagers, she believed this and gave up on school until the Deepshikha programme started in her village in 2009.

“The facilitator told us: This is the 21st century and we should all get educated, especially the girls who can do anything!” Tejaswini recalls.

Now, the shelf behind her bed in a tidy hut is crammed with school books. She dreams of having a computer job some day, although she has yet to use one.

**Shine like a star**
Changing social attitudes are also evident in the village of Dadapur, where 18-year-old Kavita Ledange leads a Deepshikha group of 35 girls.

Recently, a 16-year-old unmarried girl got pregnant in the village and was shunned by the community. But Kavita recognized this unfairness and convinced the young mother to join her group. Together they talked to other villagers and finally convinced them to accept the teen mother.

“She is also just a girl like us and that is why she needs to be part of our group,” Kavita explains with a confident shrug. “And, if something like this were to happen to any of us, then what would we do without support?”

Kavita’s group is busy with a multitude of other activities, which includes a village cleanliness drive that encourages each family to build a toilet at their homes. In just two years, 142 toilets have been built here.

During village festivals, they often perform street plays that deliver social messages about domestic violence, child marriage, alcohol abuse and dowry demands. At every performance, the village echoes with the Deepshikha song: “I’m a girl. I will shine like a star…and I will spread light on the earth.”

In her free time, Kavita is an enthusiastic seamstress and one day hopes to be a fashion designer. But her greatest desire is to serve her community.

“I want to make my village happy and prosperous,” she says, waving an arm at the neat brick homes and smiling faces that already surround her.

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The facilitator told us: This is the 21st century and we should all get educated, especially the girls who can do anything!

—Tejaswini Telang, 17
Students Discover Rights Through Touch

Adolescents Stand Up for Rights

Community Mobilizes to Stop Child Labour

Girls’ Clubs Rally against Child Marriage
If I know about my rights, nobody will be able to discriminate against me.

— Mahesh Yadav, 13
Thirteen-year-old Mahesh Yadav’s long, tapered fingers glide gracefully across the page in front of him. He reads aloud from the text before him about his and every child’s rights in a Bengali Braille version of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The visually impaired teenager has come a long way from the days when he stumbled around in his own home.

“I couldn’t walk in my home, hitting walls, tables and chairs,” Mahesh recalls. “I came to this school and learned how to walk. I realized being visually impaired means nothing – we all have our own capabilities.”

Mahesh is among 180 visually challenged boys at the Ramakrishna Mission Blind Boys Academy receiving an education and vocational training. The academy also trains teachers to teach visually challenged children.

The humanitarian organization has 114 centres across India, specializing in health care, disaster relief, rural management, tribal welfare and education.

First Braille version of CRC
The academy has produced India’s first Braille version of the CRC in both Bengali and English, with UNICEF’s support. Copies of the Braille CRC are being distributed free-of-cost to schools for the visually impaired across West Bengal.

Invented by Louis Braille in 1809 in France, Braille is a script which uses six raised dots in various combinations to create 63 characters to form words and sentences. For boys like Mahesh, learning Braille and being able to read the CRC for themselves has opened up a whole new world.

“Everybody cannot see in this world. Some of us are blind. (The CRC) in Braille helps us to know about our rights,” says Mahesh, dressed in the school uniform of blue shorts and short sleeve shirt, his name sewn across the pocket. “If I know about my rights, nobody will be able to discriminate against me.”

In 1989, world leaders came together and created a special convention just for children recognizing that young people not only need special care and protection but also are entitled to certain rights just as adults are. The CRC protects children’s rights by setting standards in health care, education and legal, civil and social services.

The CRC’s four core principles are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. Each right spelled out in the convention is inherent to the human dignity and harmonious development of every child.

“The CRC recognizes that each and every child has certain inalienable rights,” says Lori Calvo, Chief of UNICEF’s West Bengal Office.
“Having the CRC available in Braille means visually impaired children can learn and understand their rights for themselves.”

Learn through touch
Parents often don’t believe that their visually impaired child’s life can be as full as that of a sighted child, says academy Principal SB Patnayak.

“Sometimes parents don’t realize a visually handicapped student can be educated,” he explains. “Parents realize later it’s been worthwhile. The parents slowly understand that their children may be educated and socially rehabilitated.”

Fifteen-year-old Pankay Sinha came to the school when he was seven after an eye specialist in his native Chennai told his parents that his blindness could not be treated. Pankay says that he used to feel ‘handicapped’ at home but his education at the academy and understanding of his rights has given him renewed confidence.

“After I come to know my rights, I am making my parents and peers aware. They should know we also have rights, and we can make a difference,” Pankay says. “(The CRC) should reach more and more people. It will reduce the stigma that visually impaired people face.

Doces of papier-mâché models of melons, onions, cauliflowers and other fruits and vegetables line a shelf along another wall so the boys can learn how to distinguish food from touch. Skeletons, toys and modelling clay are all available on shelves around the room for the boys to touch and explore.

“They do gain confidence as they stay here,” Patnayak observes. “When they finally leave the school, they feel confident they can do something for themselves, their parents and society.”

The boys need to improve their ‘tactile sensing’ in order to read Braille, says Patnayak. Teachers have the boys touch different surfaces to gauge whether they are smooth or rough. “Braille is considered the most important (skill), because it’s the only way of communicating and acquiring direct knowledge. Unless he learns Braille, he can’t read books.”
Of course one day we will all get married but not before 18 and not before my studies are finished.

— Arfa Khatun, 13
Jahir Ansari, used to work in the circus as a clown, and his face and arms are studded with scars where the knives thrown at him missed their mark. Today he works as a day labourer earning about 1,200 rupees to support his family.

His youngest daughter, Arfa Khatun, was sent out to work as a maid when she was eight-years-old. Ansari planned to marry her off when she turned 13 just as he had done with her elder brother and two sisters. But Arfa, now 13, took a stand almost unheard of in her traditional Muslim community – she said no.

“Of course one day we will all get married but not before 18 and not before my studies are finished,” says Arfa, a shy smile lighting up her face framed by two coiled braids with big ribbons adorning each side.

Arfa sits among her three friends dressed in a rainbow of yellow, green and orange on one of two beds that fills her small home. Bedding is neatly folded and placed on one end. A mosquito coil is nailed to one wall and a clock ticks on the other as a fan whirls lazily overhead.

“Right now we are children,” says her friend Saima Khatun, 13, who herself worked as a domestic but now is in the same class as Arfa and wants to be a journalist. “It won’t be hard to find a groom. We are not even thinking about marriage.”

**Make own decisions**
The girls attend the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) school run by the Government’s labour department to rehabilitate working children and help mainstream them into the education system.

Twenty-three out of the 90 schools in Purulia have child rights groups, supported by UNICEF, to educate students about their rights, as well as to train them in leadership development, communication skills and problem solving.

The children have even begun their own newsletter called *Notun Alo*, meaning ‘New Light’ in Bengali.

Learning in school has given the girls confidence to stand up to their families and communities and make decisions about their future. Initially the girls were ridiculed for the stand they were taking.

“We used to get teased. Now everyone accepts that this is our right. We can continue our studies,” Saima says. “Previously local men would have discomfort that a girl is making this decision. I challenged them: What do you know – that’s old thinking.”

“Getting children out of work and into school has empowered these young girls,” said Lori Calvo, chief of UNICEF’s West Bengal office. “Knowledge of their rights has given them the strength to say no to child marriage and complete their education.”
High rate of child marriage

West Bengal has the sixth highest rate of child marriage in the country. According to a survey done by the West Bengal Department of Women and Child Development, almost half the girls in the state were married when they were minors. Child marriage poses serious health risks both to the girl and her unborn child.

There are laws to prevent child marriage and punish those guilty of violating the law. Yet only two cases have been registered under the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 2005.

In Purulia, where about one-third of families live below the poverty line, 51 per cent of the girls marry before the age of 18.

Support from school

Initially, Arfa’s father was not ready to accept his youngest daughter’s decision to not marry at 13. So Arfa turned to NCLP for support.

“My elder sisters were not ready to get married at that early age, but my parents were not ready to accept it,” she says. “I am more determined than my sisters, and I’m getting support from my school.”

In the end Ansari was convinced by his daughter and the pleas of her teacher and fellow students. He’d also seen the hard life his other daughter leads. At 18, she already has four children to take care of.

“I realize that once a girl gets married she gets worn out physically. I look at her face, and her face reflects that she is not well,” he says.

Getting children out of work and into school has empowered these young girls. Knowledge of their rights has given them the strength to say no to child marriage and complete their education.

— Lori Calvo,
Chief, Field Office,
West Bengal
COMMUNITY MOBILIZES TO STOP CHILD LABOUR

The fact that I’m studying is what I like the best about school...I’m not going anymore to work on cotton, I’m going to study.

— Mukesh Somaji Damore, 12
When Mukesh Somaji Damore, 12, left his village two years ago to work in the cotton fields he missed home. Every morning, on an empty stomach, he would wake up at 4 am to start pruning and pollinating the cotton plants.

In the evening, after a 14-hour day, like all of the children working beside him, Mukesh was left to prepare his own dinner. He had been given only a bag of flour to prepare his meals with and if he wanted vegetables to eat he had to buy them himself.

After eating, he would stare at the television before going to sleep side-by-side with a dozen other children on the floor of a shed. “I felt very sad. There were days when I would cry,” recalls Mukesh.

Instead of doing homework or playing with his friends, Mukesh began work each day pollinating cotton plants. Without a mask, or any protective equipment, he constantly felt sick from the pesticides spread over the crops each morning. “I felt ill there, I always had a fever,” says Mukesh.

Since he had arrived without any money he took out a line of credit from his employer to buy food. At the time Mukesh didn’t know exactly how much he was getting paid and at the end of three months of work, he was handed 1,000 rupees.

**In the fields and out-of-school**
The cotton industry is big business in India, the world’s second largest cotton producer. In Dungarpur district in the state of Rajasthan, tens of thousands of children, like Mukesh, were taken across the border each year to work in the cotton fields of the neighbouring state of Gujarat, which has one quarter of India’s total land under cotton seed and cotton production. District officials say however that the number of children crossing the border has declined significantly as a result of increased action to stop child labour.

Among disadvantaged communities, particularly tribal communities, children working in the cotton fields have become commonplace. Unscrupulous middlemen go door-to-door in the district offering cash advances to families in return for sending their children to work during the monsoon harvest season. The children are picked up in the middle of the night in a jeep and taken across the border to work.

Thirteen-year-old Raju Rama Pargi was told to be ready at midnight. He didn’t know much about picking cotton when he agreed to work in the fields, but he had seen kids from his village come back with new clothes and watches. Raju wanted a mobile phone and the cotton fields seemed the only way to get one.

Raju didn’t know where he was going, or who he was meeting at the main road at midnight, two kilometres from his home in Ratadia village. All he knew was that he was heading to Gujarat and that his parents wouldn’t approve.

Just before midnight Raju and his cousin, Kachra Waghya Pargi, 14, slipped away and walked to where

> Now I would like to keep studying and become a teacher.
> — Raju Rama Pargi, 13
a jeep was waiting with four other children he didn’t know. The jeep, however, was quickly stopped by a police checkpoint targeting child trafficking and Raju headed back to his village knowing he was in trouble at home.

His parents were furious. “I never would have allowed him to go,” says Raju’s mother, Shanta Pargi.

**Community combats child labour**

People’s Education and Development Organisation (PEDO), a local NGO working with UNICEF on a child protection programme to get children out of the fields and into schools, convinced Raju that going back to school would be best for his future.

The experience has motivated Raju to go to school regularly and study hard. “Now I would like to keep studying and become a teacher,” he says.

Similarly, when Mukesh came back to Pallasavu village after the harvest season, he vowed never to go back. He knew before he left that he would lose out. “When I agreed to go, I knew I would have to drop out (of school), and lose out,” he says.

On hearing that Mukesh was out-of-school, his neighbour, Champalala Tabira, 45, knocked on the family’s door to talk to his mother about re-enrolling him.

Mukesh had already missed much of the school year, so Tabira made repeated visits and encouraged him to start again the following term. “I asked her to send him to school to make her son’s future brighter,” says Tabira.

Despite not ever setting foot in a classroom as a child, Tabira understands the importance of education for a child and the community. “Even if one child in 100 stays out-of-school, our whole community remains backward,” she says.

Tabira is a member of the Village Child Protection Committee, which is part of UNICEF’s effort, supported by IKEA Foundation, to mobilize local communities across the district to stop child labour. Last year, thanks to the volunteer committee’s enrolment campaign, 50 new students in the village joined school.

To help build on that momentum, the 15-member committee meets huddled around a hand-drawn map of the village. After surveying the village’s 150 households, they’ve highlighted homes with children out-of-school in bright red marker.

They make frequent visits to these families encouraging them to send their children to school and educating them about available government schemes to help ease any financial burden.

Rajasthan’s state government is expanding the effort to prevent children from going into cotton fields by surveying vulnerable households across the state to identify child labour hot spots. In the state’s southernmost districts, like Dungarpur, UNICEF has already trained 90 village leaders, 120 community workers and linked 1,500 families with social protection schemes to help combat child labour.

**Back to school**

Now back in school, Mukesh has developed an interest in science because his teacher takes the time to patiently explain difficult concepts until he understands. His lessons in Sanskrit are still a challenge, but he’s happy to be back. “The fact that I’m studying is what I like the best about school,” says Mukesh.

Mukesh doesn’t plan on stopping his studies anytime soon and now has his sights set on becoming a teacher himself. “I’m not going anymore to work on cotton, I’m going to study,” he says.

> Even if one child in 100 stays out-of-school, our whole community remains backward.
> 
> — Champalala Tabira, member, Village Child Protection Committee
GIRLS’ CLUBS RALLY AGAINST CHILD MARRIAGE

Now it’s not our time to get married. We’ll not get to play. We’ll not get to go to school.

— Rumi Hemrom, 13
Thirteen-year-old Rumi Hemrom is a born leader. So she knew what she had to do when her friend Seema told her that her parents were arranging her marriage at the age of 14.

Together with other members of her adolescent girls’ club they went to Seema’s parents and grandmother again and again until they convinced them that it would be better for them to wait until their daughter was ready for marriage both physically and emotionally.

“Now it’s not our time to get married,” explains Rumi, dressed in her crisp school uniform, her hair in neat plaits. “We’ll not get to play. We’ll not get to go to school.”

Initially, Seema’s family was resistant to delaying the marriage.

“At the beginning I was opposed to it, but when everyone came and they started talking to me, I came around,” said Seema’s grandmother, Kokila Sahu. “Before all these things were not discussed. Now it is coming out that difficulties can arise when girls getting married at an early age can have problems giving birth.”

Clubs give girls platform

In 2007, UNICEF supported the establishment of adolescent girls’ clubs in 50 villages and 30 tea gardens in the Dibrugarh district of Assam. In just three years, the number of clubs has grown in 380 villages and 80 tea gardens with over 16,000 girls registered.

“They are making a significant difference,” says Aniruddha Kulkarni, child protection officer in UNICEF’s Assam office. “Most importantly, the adolescent girls have a platform. They have their own space, which they never had before to talk to each other, play with each other and discuss issues that they otherwise would never have discussed, like what is the right age to get married, the right age to start working.”

Despite legislation forbidding child marriage in India since 1929 with the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the adoption of the much more progressive Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2006, marrying children off at a very tender age continues to be accepted by large sections of Indian society.

Nearly half of all young women marry before the legal age of 18 and nearly a third of young men marry before the legal age of 21. The situation is even more acute in rural areas.

The adolescent girls’ clubs are a means to keep girls in schools and keep them from marrying before they are either physically or emotionally ready. Girls who marry early are usually compelled into childbearing, and are subject to higher risk of domestic violence and abuse, increased economic dependence, denial of decision-making power and inequality at home.
A girl’s prospects for development are severely curtailed, resulting in a vicious cycle of gender discrimination, illiteracy and high infant and maternal mortality rates.

“It’s been a very slow process. We’ve taken cautious steps. It’s not like a one shot injection that will turn things around for the girls. But it’s more about involving them to move ahead for them as young adults and become stronger women, which they are doing slowly now. They want to make a living for themselves and become independent,” Kulkarni says. “It’s like a seed - you have to water it for it to become a plant. It’s not going to happen overnight.”

**Education makes a difference**

Too often, investing in girls’ education is perceived as a waste of resources as families believe educating a girl will benefit only her future husband’s household. Families tend to concentrate investment on schooling boys.

The landmark passing of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009 should help keep girls in school and out of child marriages. There were an estimated eight million six to 14-year-olds who were out-of-school in India in 2009. For the first time in India’s history, children are guaranteed their right to quality elementary education by the state with the help of families and communities.

Rumi, who plans to become a nurse, says her mother, who works in the tea gardens, and her father, a carpenter, have always supported her right to go to school.

“Our parents always tell us: You study well. We cannot give you so much, but if you study hard you will be able to do much better later on,” says Rumi.

“They (the clubs) are making a significant difference. Most importantly, the adolescent girls have a platform. They have their own space, which they never had before to talk to each other, play with each other and discuss issues.

— Aniruddha Kulkarni, UNICEF Child Protection Officer
Encourage Youth Participation

- Children’s Radio Show Tackles Big Issues
- Young Reporters Give Voice to Hopes and Dreams
- Youths Capture Real Life on Video
- Teenagers Bring Positive Changes to Communities
Before, I always thought you had to be grownup and finished all your studies to be part of a radio programme, but now I have the confidence and can easily do the job.

— Nabanita Das, 13
Robin Das is a small boy who broadcasts big ideas. While he served tea in a tiny shop near Kolkata’s railway station, he formed plenty of opinions about the swirling, unsettling world around him.

For a start, he thinks tea stall customers shouldn’t beat child servers, shop owners shouldn’t steal wages and parents should help children stay in school.

“These are just some of my thoughts,” says the diminutive 14-year-old, who could easily pass for a child half his age. “But now, thanks to fate, I can share them.”

Recently, Robin was chosen from a group of railway-area kids to join a radio programme supported by UNICEF that puts disadvantaged children behind the microphone for a half-hour show called ‘Children’s Journey’, or Shishu Tirtha in their native Bengali.

Produced from three radio studios at the city’s prestigious Jadavpur University’s School of Media Communication and Culture, the show regularly airs news reports and interviews prepared each week by about 30 children who come from nearby slums and neighbourhoods, government schools and most recently, a boys’ academy for the blind.

Young reporters train peers
Thoughtful and outgoing, it is clear Robin is determined to make the most of his opportunity. Until recently, he had only planned to keep working so his younger sister, Sadhana, 11, could afford to stay in school. For three years now, he’s helped support his family of six, despite his own desire for an education.

“I told my parents that I would only work if some of my money could be given for Sadhana,” he explains. Already, his mother and other sisters work as maids, including the six-year-old, he says. Now, Robin intends to tackle the topic of child labour in his first report.

Another new recruit, 17-year-old Suraj Jha plans to focus on stereotypes faced by those, like him, who are visually impaired.

“People are always very quick to say things to us like: Oh, you are blind so you must sing very well,” says Suraj, who attends a city academy for boys. “I want to point out that we have many talents just like anyone.”

To do this, Suraj will get radio training from university staff, programme supervisors and an earlier batch of adolescent radio reporters. After just a year, the three girls and one boy who will help teach him are already seasoned radio journalists or ‘RJ’s’, as they like to be called.

Right to be heard
These ‘RJs’ are out on nearby streets interviewing people for a series of
upcoming stories. Holding a tiny white recorder, they each examine a different aspect of traffic and noise pollution.

Nabanita Das, 13, suggests a story about students dodging a dangerous fleet of buses parked near a school. Ipshita Baidya, 13, wants to look at whether roadside food stalls are contaminated by passing traffic. Kannyasree Das, 13, proposes a look at ‘no horn zones’ outside schools. And their male team member, Rajata Haldar, also 13, wonders if blaring music from street stalls disturb students.

Working as a team, they easily approach a steady stream of strangers, looking for key interviews for each story. “Before, I always thought you had to be grownup and finished all your studies to be part of a radio programme, but now I have the confidence and can easily do the job,” says Nabanita, as she climbs into a parked bus to interview the startled driver.

Emerging moments later, she excitedly tells her friends, “Oh, that was great! The driver agrees this is a serious issue because the road is under construction and there’s very little space to manoeuvre, so the safety of students can be a real problem.”

Looking on, programme supervisor Anindita Roy says adults are often sceptical when the young reporters first approach them. “That’s exactly the issue, really, because many adults don’t take children seriously, and that’s why they need to be reporters, because they have the right to be heard,” says Roy.

Back at the radio studio, the children agree child labour must be featured in another show. “It’s never difficult to find another topic,” says Rajata with a shrug. “We just talk about issues in our own lives.”
YOUNG REPORTERS GIVE VOICE TO HOPES AND DREAMS

People understand that we’re trying to make changes here and they are impressed by our stories.

— Suman Joshi, 14
When 16-year-old Pausha Madharia speaks, she gives voice to the hopes, dreams and fears of every child in Chhattisgarh.

Standing before the State Assembly, she shared her concerns about child labour, discrimination faced by young girls and the troubles stumbled upon by some simply trying to attend school.

Without hesitation, Pausha told legislators that drunken men sprawled on the road outside a wine shop in her neighbouring village of Murmunda were regularly threatening school children.

“I said people consuming liquor were creating a nuisance for children trying to get past for classes,” she recalls. “I asked that these shops be moved away from any public place.”

She also wrote about the issue in a newspaper just launched here called Bal Swaraj or Children’s Republic. The paper, published twice monthly in the state, started in 2007 as part of UNICEF’s ‘Child Reporters Initiative’.

Wine shop manager Mithlesh Pande says he is now more sympathetic to the children’s concerns.

“I am trying to do my job here,” says Pande. “But after the news story, I am also helping the children,” he says, as he arranges to roust a man recently passed out on the nearby road.

The Child Reporters Initiative recruits and trains child volunteers in an effort to fulfil Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that gives children the right to speak freely and express their concerns.

“\[The students are raising problems and showing confidence that most elders can’t display.\]” — Hemraj Sahu, headmaster

Large segments of Chhattisgarh face violent political unrest, making outreach and provision of social services more difficult for young people and their families.

Assisted by NGO Mayaram Surjan Foundation, about 1,200 child reporters like Pausha are now writing on issues affecting them, their families and communities in Chhattisgarh.

**Highlight serious issues**

With the help of another child reporter and friend, 16-year-old Puja Dewangan, Pausha tackled the dangerous village practice of consulting faith healers, rather than trained doctors. In their village, a child died because of inadequate treatment, they say.

Puja, who recently drew an intricate rangoli, a colourful chalk pattern, outside her home for a festival, helped design a cartoon to accompany the faith healer article. It shows a long-haired holy man waving a wand over his patient’s head, as a skull and crossed bones warn of danger.

A recent issue of Bal Swaraj also described the plight of a girl suffering from polio, the perils of chewing tobacco, children working illegally as carpenters and in hotels, and the poverty that prevents them from attending classes.
अंधविश्वास ने ली जगमोहन की जान

©UNICEF India/Graham Crouch
At Murmunda’s Government Middle School, six students have regularly submitted articles to the newspaper. Umashanker Joshi, 14, wrote about the near-drowning of a 10-year-old boy who fell into an uncovered well.

On a hot afternoon, the child, Devrath Chandel, was reaching into the well and splashing friends when he lost his balance and plunged into the water. The boy’s friend, Lakesh Lahre, and others managed to make a human chain and pull him out.

After Umashanker wrote about the incident, the sarpanch (village head) saw his story and arranged to have the well outside an abandoned home filled in with dirt.

“I am feeling good that I am working like this to help children,” Umashanker says. His parents, both uneducated labourers, are also proud of him. “They tell me to keep doing this good work.”

The teen also wrote about a five-year-old boy who was performing a tightrope act at a village festival. Each night, he teetered dangerously over the dusty square while performing his acrobatic stunts.

“This is dangerous work and child labour is not allowed,” the teen wrote.

Agents of change
Each child reporter is issued an official press pass that they can show to story subjects. Fourteen-year-old Suman Joshi flashed hers when she visited the public works office to research an article about a flooding drain near the school.

“People understand that we’re trying to make changes here,” says Suman, “and they are impressed by our stories.”

School headmaster Hemraj Sahu says he reads the children’s paper regularly and learns a lot about his community in this manner. “The students are raising problems and showing confidence that most elders can’t display,” says Sahu.

“I am feeling good that I am working like this to help children.”
— Umashanker Joshi, 14
YOUTHS CAPTURE REAL LIFE ON VIDEO

My father would not allow us to go out of the house but after I joined the centre and started doing this work, the biggest thing that I have attained is my own freedom.

— Santoshi Singh, 17
Rahul Goswami, 21, won’t forget the last time he saw the girl who loved to draw. He was in Bow Bazaar, a bustling neighbourhood known for its sparkling bridal jewellery and, down its narrow back lanes, a steady trade in young prostitutes.

As Rahul interviewed people for a news story about ‘What Freedom Means’, he spotted the girl who had once taken painting classes with him at a local children’s centre.

“She was angry and hurled abusive language at me,” he recalls. “She yelled: Now, you can see what freedom really means.” Only then did Rahul realize that the 17-year-old girl was a prostitute.

Devastated by the encounter, he wrote about it in *Youth Speak*, a newspaper produced by a team of young people growing up around Kolkata’s red-light districts and adjoining slum areas.

The monthly paper publishes their colourful drawings and powerful stories and is part of a youth participation programme supported by UNICEF and implemented by Sanlaap, an NGO working with children in these disadvantaged areas.

Recently, Rahul and his team learned to make one-minute videos about their thoughts and experiences through the programme.

**Reaching out to children**

Rahul first joined Sanlaap at age 12 and says it became a lifeline for him and other children struggling to make sense of their communities.

Raised by a single mother, he scrambled to finish school, while working at fish markets, for caterers and painting signs for political parties.

Today, he is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree from a neighbourhood college. Even now, he wears a blue ‘Live Strong’ bracelet that reminds him: “That whatever I do, I have to do with lots of guts.”

Rahul’s determined to keep telling young people’s stories. He meets other young reporters at the Sanlaap centre in Khidderpore, next to the dockyards. Brothels flourish here, too.

As the reporters hash out ideas for their fifth short video, down the street, circles of sex workers play card games on the pavement. The videos, which are shown to children at the centre, are a way of reaching out to those who might not read the newspapers.

Already, they’ve shot one called ‘The Pavement’, which artfully shows life from a young beggar’s point of view.

Another called ‘Pressure’, tells the personal struggle of fellow reporter Putul Sharma as she deals with her parents’ demand that she marry at 16.

With overlapping shots of wedding bangles and classroom scenes, she outlines her wish to finish school. Making this video helped her finally speak to her parents, Putul says.

“They were looking for a groom for me but I didn’t dare tell them of my wishes until finally they could see me doing the video.”
Santoshi Singh, 17, says her work with the reporting team has also given her something that her four sisters never experienced.

“My father would not allow us to go out of the house but after I joined the centre and started doing this work, the biggest thing that I have attained is my own freedom,” says Santoshi proudly.

Videos show daily life
In most of the videos, the young reporters act out scenes themselves with the help of neighbourhood children. Asked why, reporter Ajay Thakur, 18, doesn’t hesitate with a reply.

“Sometimes if we take these roles and do them ourselves, then we can better understand and internalize their pain,” he says.

Ajay gets up at 5 am to deliver newspapers before going to school and then in the evenings, counsels other children at the centre about their rights.

He is also a keen video maker who rushes about today organizing children to play cricket for their newest production. They laugh as he takes a turn at bat and completely misses the ball, which bounces off a tiny temple hanging over nearby river ghats.

After some heated debate, the young reporters have decided their latest video will have “plenty of happiness, laughter and children’s cheer,” explains Rahul, who is directing this production.

“We’re always doing grim, dark subjects so today we just want to focus on the lighter side of life.”

“Sometimes if we take these roles and do them ourselves, then we can better understand and internalize their pain.”

— Ajay Thakur, 18
TEENAGERS BRING POSITIVE CHANGES TO COMMUNITIES

It is our right to voice opinions and raise issues for people. Before the child reporter programme, we didn’t know this and couldn’t change much, but now we can.

— Gopal Kushawaha, 14
S

hy and soft-spoken, Gopal Kushawaha hovers in the background when he’s with boisterous school friends. But give the fourteen-year-old a pen and notepad and there isn’t a topic that he won’t tackle.

Whether it’s a village official who cuts corners, or a teacher who doesn’t turn up for class, Gopal jots down the details, interviews all concerned and helps publish his account in a newspaper called Voice of Children, circulated every month in rural communities across Madhya Pradesh.

Often when adults read the newspaper, change follows. Recently, Gopal, who is from a tiny village bordered by lush wheat fields, wrote about long lineups at Baharpur’s ration shop. Villagers were regularly waiting eight hours for their portions of rice, sugar, salt and kerosene.

“People couldn’t go to work and were just wasting time in the line-ups,” Gopal explains.

After his article, the shop set aside specific days for each village. Villagers and shop officials were pleased with the result.

“There isn’t a big rush now, people are more relaxed and we find it much better,” says shop assistant Dinesh Kumar Dubey.

Gopal and about a dozen teens in his village are part of an extensive network of young journalists currently writing about their own rural communities, as part of UNICEF’s ‘Child Reporters Initiative’.

The programme recruits and trains child volunteers in an effort to fulfill Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that gives children the right to speak freely and express their concerns.

It started in 2006 with government partners and Dalit Sangh, an NGO dedicated to uplifting disadvantaged groups in the Hoshangabad district.

Praise and respect
The confidence of being a reporter is evident in 16-year-old Aarti Goswami from the neighbouring village of Jamunia. Clutching a notebook crammed with interviews, Aarti recalls her unflinching determination to write about a local male maths teacher who was improperly touching female students.

Everyone in the community knew this, including school officials. But many were bribed by the offending teacher to keep silent, says Aarti, who wants to be a lawyer. In the end, she went to higher government authorities for help and wrote about the experience. The teacher was finally dismissed.

Aarti’s parents, who are both beggars, say they never worried about repercussions. “Why should our daughter worry about doing good?” says her father, Kamal Goswami, who cares for a small shrine beside their home.

“Before it was all dirty here and now we are much happier. These children are doing good work.”
— Kamal Singh, villager, Baharpur village

— Kamal Singh, villager, Baharpur village
“If we do a wrong, then we should be scared but not for helping people.”

On the contrary, the family “received much praise and respect” for their daughter’s work, says mother Anita. “We were never educated but our daughter will be.”

**Children do good work**

Naresh Pawar, a senior reporter for 27 years at a major Hindi newspaper, helped train many of the teens and marvels at their progress. “The maturity that I see in these kids is something you don’t see in most news reporters until far into their careers,” says Pawar.

In Baharpur village, child reporter Ganpatsingh Kushawaha, 14, confronted issues close to home when he wrote about a drain that regularly spewed sewage down the path that he walks to school.

After the article, neighbour Kamal Singh was thrilled to find raw waste no longer flows past his neat, bright blue house on the lane.

“Before it was all dirty here and now we are much happier,” says Singh. “These children are doing good work.”

Down by the village’s *anganwadi* centre, cheerfully painted with cartoon characters and an array of healthy fruits and vegetables, centre worker Sheila Kushawaha agrees that child reporters are “raising important issues so things can be improved in our village”.

For example, the local school didn’t have a sports field until 14-year-old Rukimini Pal wrote about it. Now Kushawaha stops Rukimini to ask her to write an article about the need for a barrier wall at the centre to stop little children from running onto the main road.

“If Rukimini writes about it, then surely they will fix it,” says Kushawaha.

**Right to speak**

Many adults admit that while they are often too intimidated to approach officials in government, schools and elsewhere, the young reporters don’t hesitate.

“Now these children are so confident and well trained that they can talk to anyone, including the president of India,” says Kushawaha.

Recently, APJ Abdul Kalam, the country’s former president, met 11 child reporters. Among them was Gopal who was asked by the president if he found it difficult to write stories.

Smoothing his crisply pressed shirt, the teen replied: “It is our right to voice opinions and raise issues for people. Before the child reporter programme, we didn’t know this and couldn’t change much, but now we can.”

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“Now these children are so confident and well trained that they can talk to anyone, including the president of India.”

— Sheila Kushawaha, *anganwadi worker*
4 SUSTAIN A HEALTHY GENERATION

- Students Show Clean Hands Prevent Disease
- Iron Supplements Break Cycle of Anaemia
- Sport Key to Children’s Development
I tell them the importance of handwashing with soap because otherwise the germs are on our hands, get into our mouths and may cause disease.

— Govinder Jauhar, 15
As they dash from class for the school’s mid-day meal, Mahesh Kushawaha, 13, and fellow students peer into plastic cases and fumble with other small containers. But it’s not food that they seek. It’s soap.

Clutching their bars, they march to a corner of the school terrace where two boys in smart blue uniforms stand waiting with water jugs and a ladle. Then, one by one, the children carefully wash their hands.

“This is our duty,” explains a proud Mahesh. “We will stay strong and healthy.”

The teen and his friends at the tiny village school of Tinsiyahi are among thousands of students, parents, siblings and neighbours from Madhya Pradesh currently learning how proper handwashing prevents disease.

The handwashing campaign, part of a UNICEF programme called ‘School Saving Lives’, stresses the importance of using soap, not just water, to clean hands before eating or preparing food, after using the toilet, changing a baby’s soiled pants and other tasks.

The programme is operating thanks to a unique partnership between UNICEF and the Bharat Scout and Guides troops around the state that produces ‘patrol leaders’ or children from among their ranks to run cleanliness campaigns in their schools and communities.

**Encourage good hygiene**

Until he was asked to be a patrol leader for Tinsiyahi school, Govinder Jauhar, 15, says he would happily plunge his hands into a plateful of snacks without properly washing.

“We would come home from studies or a cricket match after school and just start taking our food without washing,” recalls Govinder. In the past, he suffered bouts of fever and diarrhoea.

Now, he’s avoiding illness and encouraging his family and friends to do the same. “I tell them the importance of handwashing with soap because otherwise the germs are on our hands, get into our mouths and may cause disease,” he explains with clear conviction.

Govinder has also been instrumental in encouraging another key element of the programme. He convinced his parents to build a toilet in the home shared with 10 family members. But it wasn’t easy.

After a five-day training session that took him and other patrol leaders to Bhopal, the state’s capital city, for the first time, Govinder learned that his village was likely spreading disease by using their fields for toilets.

He asked his father to get bricks, mortar and fixtures to construct an indoor stall. But his father kept delaying construction. Finally, Govinder refused to go to school until they became the first in his village of 45 families to build a toilet. Now, neighbours in Morekhedi village are following their example.

Govinder’s mother, Munnibai, is impressed with the outcome. “It was always a little shameful to go outside to the toilet,” she says, hugging her baby granddaughter, Nidhi. “Now we can be clean and private.”
Change community behaviour
Tania Goldner, UNICEF’s Chief of Field Office for Madhya Pradesh, says that it is youths like Govinder who are helping to bring change in community behaviour. “First they influence their peers, then family and neighbours, so the change spreads further,” she adds.

Back at the village school, teacher and scout patrol leader, Sangeeta Gupchup says her students were always keen to adopt the programme but many adults initially feared school wells couldn’t supply enough water for drinking, let alone handwashing. It was the children who thought of bringing their own bottles of water and soap supplies.

“The parents, teachers, villagers had all been trying to solve this problem, but it was the children who came up with the solution,” says Gupchup with obvious pride.

Turning back to her students who quietly wait to eat their mid-day meals, the group chants one final prayer. “All should be happy. All should be free from diseases.”
We feel empowered that we can explain to our friends and spread messages about anaemia.
— Deepa Kumari, 14
Deepa Kumari, 14, began to feel dizzy and weak in class seven when she started her menstrual cycle.

“I used to sit in the corner of my classroom not feeling good,” says Deepa, who hopes one day to be a teacher in her home state of Jharkhand. “I felt it was only happening to me, because others were not complaining.”

“My parents didn’t know what was wrong with me, and even my nails went pale,” recalls Deepa, dressed in her crisp school uniform decorated with a badge of the Hindu goddess of education, Saraswati. “The doctor said I was anaemic.”

**Targeting adolescents**

As many as 70 per cent of children aged 6 to 59 months and 70 per cent of women aged 15 to 49 years were anaemic in Jharkhand, according to the National Family Health Survey conducted in 2006. These unacceptably high rates of anaemia were largely due to the low iron content in women’s diet from early childhood to adulthood.

An iron-deficient diet, year after year, perpetuates an inter-generational cycle of anaemia: anaemic women giving birth to infants who are born with low iron stores and grow to become anaemic children. This has devastating consequences for children’s physical growth, mental development and school performance.

The strategy, adopted by the state government and UNICEF, was simple and cost effective – target adolescent girls. A single weekly dose of Iron Folic Acid (IFA) tablet is given to all girls between the ages of 10 and 19. It costs only nine rupees to provide a girl with 52 tablets a year.

Students in 13,000 schools in the state are part of the programme. Out-of-school girls are reached through more than 38,000 *anganwadi* village-based child development and nutrition centres.

Teachers and principals supervise and monitor the implementation of the anaemia control programme in schools while *anganwadi* workers target out-of-school adolescents in villages.

The programme reaches out to 2.8 million girls and expects to change the face of anaemia in the state in only a few years.

**Students educate students**

Adolescent girls receive information on the causes and consequences of anaemia and the importance of supplementation and iron-rich foods into their diets. Students, like Deepa, help reinforce anaemia prevention with their peers through one-on-one counselling.

“We feel empowered that we can explain to our friends and spread messages about anaemia,” says Deepa. “When I went back home my parents, they listened and now I’m passing it on to my younger sister and out-of-school friends.”

“**Our food at home has changed, and we know now to take iron tablets so she (my sister) will never suffer from anaemia as I did.**”

— Deepa Kumari, 14
Deepa says her 11-year-old sister, Sapna, won’t get anaemia because of the preventive care and information she is receiving at school.

“Our food at home has changed, and we know now to take iron tablets so she will never suffer from anaemia as I did,” she says. “My parents are very proud of me.”

Messages include the importance of eating a balanced diet with a mix of protein, fruits and vegetables, deworming regularly and using mosquito nets to avoid malaria.

Deepa speaks confidently about the symptoms of anaemia including loss of appetite, weakness, breathlessness and heavy menstrual flow.

**Drop-outs decrease**
Another peer educator, 14-year-old Ankita Kumari, says that many adolescent girls drop out of school when they begin menstruating or suffer from anaemia. Too often, traditional tribal communities in Jharkhand do not value educating girls. Girls are considered an economic burden or *paraya dhan* – investing in education will only benefit a girl’s future husband’s household.

“Many girls in my community don’t go to school. Families prefer that the boys should be in school,” Ankita says. “I’m lucky – my parents always thought that I should get everything equal to my brother.

— Ankita Kumari, 14

Drop-out rates, which were formerly more than 50 per cent, are less than five per cent for the 656 girls currently enrolled, of which 60 per cent are tribal.

As the girls’ health and test results improve, so has the community’s mindset about educating their daughters. The landmark passing of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009, guaranteeing every child the right to quality elementary education in India, should also ensure more girls go to and stay in school.

Since the anaemia prevention programme started at the girls’ school in 2001, test results have risen steadily from 59.6 per cent in 2001, to 70.8 per cent in 2005, to 80 per cent in 2010.
I would think there was no use to play games, but after doing this and working with the children, I understand how important it is and how joyful we can feel.

— Devakala Dingule, 18
Laxmi Durge’s thick braid sways as the 18-year-old pretends to rinse lentils before a crowd of mesmerized school children. “Now this is how we cook the dahl,” the teenaged-girl shouts while staggering under the weight of an imaginary pot.

Immediately, about 50 students eagerly mimic her actions while repeating the chorus. As their voices echo across the dusty school ground, a group of passing villagers in a heavily-laden bullock cart stops to observe the commotion.

Curious, they watch the girl in a tan sports shirt, cap and blue track pants lead the children in an hour-long series of games. When the action pauses for a moment, an old man approaches Laxmi. “What is this show?” he asks.

“I am the community sports coach,” she explains with shy pride. “We are teaching children in our village how to stay strong and healthy.”

It’s a lofty goal in this remote Maharashtrian village of Murti where not one student at Zilla Parishad Upper Primary School wears shoes. Most are from tribal communities who subsistence farm and struggle to support their families.

But Laxmi is determined to pass on the knowledge and inspiration that she’s recently acquired in the International Inspiration-Sports for Development programme, supported by UNICEF and the government.

The programme aims to increase awareness and acceptance of sport as a key part of children’s education and development in society. Started in the disadvantaged district of Chandrapur, the programme recruits a girl and boy from each of the more than 500 villages, training them in ways to use sport for development, teaching them the use of sport to educate and inform, and then sending them back to local schools and communities where physical education and sports aren’t generally taught.

The community coaches also pass on a variety of social messages and life skills through organized sport sessions.

Success through teamwork
At the government school in Chincholi village, it’s clear that community sports coach Devakala Dingule, 18, has more on her mind than just teaching children a ball relay game. The team of children in red pinafores is still celebrating their relay victory when she asks them why they won. Looking puzzled at first, the students finally agree that they worked well together as a team.

“Yes, this is also true in life,” Devakala tells them. “In society we must help each other. As a family, we work together, and also at school we share notes or do tasks together. This is how we succeed.”

After a raucous game of kabaddi, a team sport that has boys and girls trying to snatch opponents before they escape across a boundary line,
Devakala points out that it would be impossible to do this alone. “When we take the help of our friends, then we can do this easily. With unity, we find strength.”

She admits that in the past, sports seemed frivolous to her. “I would think there was no use to play games, but after doing this and working with the children, I understand how important it is and how joyful we can feel.”

More interest in school
Student Vaishali Bawane, 12, found the leaping aggression of the kabaddi game uncomfortable until coach Devakala encouraged her. Part of the coaches’ mandate is to make an extra effort to include girls who typically aren’t as involved in sports.

“I was finding it hard to play but it was fun when I could do it,” Vaishali says shyly.

Devakala has posted a schedule in the school that outlines the hours when she plans to come each week for sport sessions. But in this small village, all the children know where she lives and are always keen to continue.

“Sometimes, they will come to my home and ask for more games. They don’t like to stop,” Devakala says.

It’s the same in the classroom, says teacher Prakash Nandigamwar. “They ask us to organize more sports for them,” he says. “Earlier, kids didn’t like to come to school but now they are more interested and the dropouts are becoming less.”

Aruna Kawathe, a subject expert who regularly visits schools in the district, says she has also noticed a change for the better.

“Through this programme, they are building up the confidence of the children,” says Kawathe. “Previously, they would be hesitant to play at school, and now they ask the teachers for sport. They tell them: We need this. It is good for us all.”

“Earlier, kids didn’t like to come to school but now they are more interested and the dropouts are becoming less.”

— Prakash Nandigamwar, teacher
5 AGENTS OF CHANGE

Messengers of Knowledge
Improve Villagers’ Lives

Red Ribbon Clubs Spread
Prevention Message

Children Map
Community for Good
MESSENGERS OF KNOWLEDGE IMPROVE VILLAGERS’ LIVES

It has been our tradition for women not to work with men. But we try to tell villagers to stop this because, while we might be physically different, our intellectual abilities are the same.

— Seema Dwivedi, 17
Giggling beneath her blindfold, 20-year-old Seema Dwivedi holds out her arms and dizzily pokes at a picture of a famous Indian tennis player.

In her right hand, she holds a *bindi*, the red dot found on the foreheads of most Indian women. Her goal is to put the *bindi* back between the eyes of female tennis star Sania Mirza.

Nearby, in the shade along a whitewashed wall, a crowd of women cheer for Seema, while across the square in this remote Chhattisgarh village, the men stand separately and shout their support.

With a last jab, Seema puts the *bindi* at the top of Mirza’s forehead and the crowd laughs at her near miss. But later, Seema and her fellow ‘Messengers of Knowledge’ don’t miss the chance to pass on information aimed at improving villagers’ lives.

**Teaching communities**

Seema and her friends are members of Nehru Yuva Kendra, a group of government-funded youth clubs supported by UNICEF, working in rural villages across India. They reach out to communities on programmes for education, health, sanitation, child rights and gender issues among many others.

On the agenda today in the village of Mathaldabri is a discussion on community action, team-building and gender equality.

“It has been our tradition for women not to work with men,” says Seema, pointing out the gender separation obvious even in the cheering crowd.

“But we try to tell villagers to stop this because, while we might be physically different, our intellectual abilities are the same.”

Today, Seema is far from her home village of Mohalla, deep in a forested area that often experiences violent conflict between Maoist groups and government security forces.

Seema says the violence has troubled her community and the paramilitary presence can be overpowering but she is determined to continue her work, passing on information about programmes to fight malaria, encourage vaccinations and treat diarrhoea, one of the biggest threats to children there.

**Play and work together**

Now at the sports day, red dust flies and bangles rattle as two teams of women with saris tucked up at their waists play a game of *raasa kaasi*, or tug of war, at opposite ends of a long rope.

Later, a group of young girls prance around a circle, playing a fierce game of musical chairs.

Looking on, Ramsuchit Mishra, Programme Manager of Nehru Yuva Kendra, smiles. “There are two events in Chhattisgarh that are most popular: sports and culture,” observes Mishra.

“I’m happy to see the villagers having so much fun and it’s very good to see the women participating in sports.”

— Dinesh Yadaw, 13
“Everyone will gather in a village for these events so it’s always a good forum to pass on our development messages.”

Chunni Yadav, a panchayat (local government) representative, agrees. “I support this work because today you can see gender issues are a problem here,” he says. “But with this sports day, the men and women are getting together to play and enjoy themselves. Slowly, slowly, they will learn.”

**Helping children back to school**

Thirteen-year-old Dinesh Yadav says he enjoys his work as a ‘messenger of knowledge’. “I’m happy to see the villagers having so much fun and it’s very good to see the women participating in sports.”

A ‘messenger’ for two years, Dinesh says he’s helped teach people about vaccination programmes for children and identified students who have dropped out of school. As a team, his group visits parents and convinces them to send kids back to classes.

Fellow ‘messenger’ Santoshi Mankpuri, 19, has also intervened for school dropouts in her village of Manpur.

“One day I saw a child working as a cow herder in the fields and I asked him why he wasn’t going to school,” recalls Santoshi. “He said his parents were very poor and needed this money.”

After the teenager visited the family and explained assistance was available to them, the child returned to school.

Santoshi’s village also lies in the midst of a Naxal-dominated region, and a displacement camp for other villagers who fear for their safety is just a few kilometres down the road.

“People are troubled in my area and that’s why it’s even more important that I try to help them,” she says.

> People are troubled in my area and that’s why it’s even more important that I try to help them.
> — Santoshi Mankpuri, 19
I want to help my village. It is not difficult to share this information with girls because they are just like me - they want to stay healthy.

— Rushali Gajabhaye, 18
Rushali Gajabhaye hasn’t travelled past the fields, coal mines and cement factories that surround her small village. But the 18-year-old is more sophisticated than most teenagers her age.

Without hesitation, she will stand before a crowd of other village girls and talk about the importance of safe sex, or spend a few moments demonstrating the proper application of a condom on a plastic model of a penis.

In the conservative context of this small village of Datala in rural Maharashtra, these are brave actions. But Rushali is undaunted and clearly proud of her volunteer position with the village’s Red Ribbon Club. Her group is working to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases in her community.

The Red Ribbon Club, part of a programme supported by UNICEF, aims to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS, spread knowledge of preventive measures and reduce stigma and overcome discrimination of people living with AIDS.

“I want to help my village,” Rushali says with such conviction that her intricate earrings swing wildly. “It is not difficult to share this information with girls because they are just like me,” she adds. “They want to stay healthy.”

World is changing
In the beginning, it wasn’t easy, Rushali admits. “People here did gossip about me and they didn’t want to send their daughters to this club.”

It didn’t help that the sarpanch (village head) wouldn’t support the club when it started in 2006.

“At first, I did wonder why this programme was necessary in our village,” the sarpanch, Asha Rohane, now admits. “I thought they were teaching rubbish because we have nice girls and boys here.”

But after Rohane watched the group organize public information campaigns, and heard her two daughters talk about what friends were learning, she relented. “I realized that the world is changing and it is best that my girls learn how to protect themselves,” says Rohane.

Now her daughters are among 39 girls between the ages of 11 and 18 who attend club meetings every Sunday in the village health centre.

Although the village might seem untroubled by much that is modern, it lies in the midst of the thriving industrial district of Chandrapur. Many work in neighbouring factories or at the massive thermal power station nearby.

Local highways are jammed with a constant stream of trucks serving this commerce and the transient activity can also encourage disease. The district is currently struggling with a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

“I realized that the world is changing and it is best that my girls learn how to protect themselves.”

— Asha Rohane, Sarpanch, Datala village
**Staying safe from HIV/AIDS**

Another club member, Vikas Rohane, 19, meets with boys in their club to talk about condom use, modes of transmission and other prevention issues.

In a matter-of-fact manner, Vikas ticks off on his fingers the topics that he raises in the group. “We tell them not to have sex with many partners, to use condoms, to take care with injections or drug use because disease can spread like this, and that it can also pass between mother and child,” he says.

Red Ribbon Club members go for their own HIV test at a nearby district hospital, and they encourage other family and community members to do the same.

The club also visits pregnant women so they can explain the risks of adult to child transmission.

At the front of their meeting room, they keep a green shoebox with a large hole cut in its top. This ‘question box’ allows community members to privately submit any written questions that they might have about disease prevention. The club works on the answers together and posts them for the public to see.

Shital Chide, 16, says her father encouraged her to join the group so she would learn more about the health risks that she might face in her life.

“It is good,” Shital says of her club experience. “This is not something to be shy about. We are simply talking about ourselves.”

___ Vikas Rohane, 19 ___
With this map, everyone in the world will know we are here. We are a community with many issues and ideas, just like anybody.

— Salim Sheikh, 13
Salim Sheikh, 13, and his friends are putting their sprawling Kolkata slum on the map – literally. For a year now, they’ve been gathering data about the people, small brick huts, crowded alleys, scattered temples, few trees, water pumps and other facts that clearly identify Rishi Aurobindo Colony, squashed next to a railway line in eastern Kolkata.

Already, with the support of UNICEF and a local NGO called Prayasam, they’ve created a colourful, hand-drawn map of their community of 9,000.

Soon, they will also upload much of the information onto one of the world’s best-known computer mapping systems, Google Earth. And Salim says he will finally feel secure in his bustling universe.

“With this map, everyone in the world will know we are here. We are a community with many issues and ideas, just like anybody,” he says.

It is this confidence that clearly inspires Salim’s neighbours when he and fellow child volunteers with the NGO Prayasam work in the community. Along with mapping, they’ve been gathering lists of residents’ concerns and taking concrete steps to fight polio and malaria, helping impoverished children attend school, finding water sources and improving public hygiene.

**Innovative mobile technology**

Called Awaz, or ‘Voice’, the project has children initiating change in a community that not long ago was mostly notorious for crime. The objective is to help children understand their rights and entitlements and provide them an opportunity to talk about development.

The mapping project started in 2010 as part of a larger child participation programme, supported by UNICEF and implemented by Prayasam, for both in school and out-of-school children in select areas in Kolkata.

Salim and his friends came up with the idea to create a community map during a series of workshops on the UN Millennium Development Goals held during the Awaz project.

At first, the children were trained to use traditional mapping tools. Later they trained to use innovative mobile phone technology developed by Matt Berg at Columbia University’s Earth Institute. Recently named one of the world’s most influential people by *Time Magazine*, Berg first created the system to help gather community health information in impoverished countries.

With Berg’s system in Kolkata, the kids were able to conduct a household survey. Going door to door, they tabulated such details as the number of residents, their ages, occupations and health issues when possible.

In teams of four, each child had a specific task – as a photographer, tabulator, map-maker or note-taker. They photographed water pumps, power sources and points of interest like schools and temples.

**Community mapping**

We want everyone to know how good this place can be. — Shikha Patra, 13
After data were collected, the children drew the map’s first draft on a big sheet of paper. It clearly labels each house, distinct blocks with different colour coding, and individual details right down to the last tree, temple, street lamp and garbage dump.

Now, the map and survey, which identifies 71 sources of water but not one clean enough for drinking, can also be used as a powerful advocacy tool, points out Prabir Saha, 15.

“Access to clean drinking water is the biggest problem in our community today,” says Prabir. “Our water is yellow (with arsenic and iron) so we only use it for washing or cooking.”

Most days, children like Prabir must trek down dangerous railway lines nearby and sometimes wait hours at a neighbouring pump, only to be turned away if authorities there object. Scuffles and fines are frequent.

Better living
Now with the map and survey data as proof, the community will approach the locally elected representative and Municipal officials for help.

Das says improvements have already been made in this manner. Pointing to a lamppost in her crowded alley, she observes, “Things are already better. We have more light here.”

The children also use survey data to target households during polio immunization campaigns.

In teams armed with handmade paper megaphones and signs, they regularly march about shouting: “Shunun, shunun (listen),” imploring neighbours to bring children for polio drops. They also take toddlers to polio booths themselves.

The children also mobilize for malaria information drives, to check on children who drop out of school, or to teach proper handwashing techniques. They tackle tough topics, like child marriage and human trafficking, with puppets and street plays at each community festival.

At the moment, the children are looking forward to putting their map and some photos onto Google Earth. They expect this to happen soon.

“We want everyone to know how good this place can be,” says 13-year-old Shikha Patra with pride.

The children worked very hard because this community mapping was very important. We cooperated because until now, the area was not on a map and nothing was ever done for us.

— Bhrati Das, resident Rishi Aurobindo Colony
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