

CRY CEO **PUJA MARWAHA** SUGGESTS WAYS TO BRING KIDS BACK TO SCHOOL

Make schools a safer space and let teachers concentrate on teaching — that's the tip Puja Marwaha, the CEO of Child Rights and You (CRY), gave to stem the rising dropout rates in West Bengal. On a trip to Calcutta recently, Marwaha shared with **t2** her journey with CRY since 1994.

What have been your hurdles so far?

At different stages, my hurdles have been different. In the initial years, looking after my own child while working for a whole lot of children required some learning. I had potential to give much more, yet was not able to. I had to make peace with it. A big leadership lesson I learnt then was that it's okay to get more than you give and vice versa at times.

Secondly, I had to deal with cynicism in my initial years and that was really hard. It was also tough to accept that I could lead and make a difference. I overcame that challenge too. CRY has changed the lives of three million children in India. But how do you reinvent and start looking forward? Are three million enough? That's the next hurdle. Then, you tend to get absorbed with children so much that you sometimes forget to tell your stories. Balancing is always difficult.

What worries you most about the condition of children in Bengal?

The number of children being trafficked to red-light areas and forced into labour from here is always a cause of worry. Children are going off the radar every day.

Bengal tops the charts in the number of missing children. They are reported missing or not reported at all. Parents think their wards have gone out of the state to work, but the children end up being trafficked. We see a growing number of trafficked children from South 24-Parganas and Midnapore.

As a state, we need to be aware of this issue and ensure all the protective structures are in place. We have to drill down to the village level. We need to find out which are the vulnerable families, what leads a child to drop out of school and seek a job. There are children working in dhabas and tea shacks everywhere. Many go missing subsequently.

Bengal also rates high in the number of school dropouts. What is the most effective way to bring kids back to the classroom?

It is actually a combination of strategies. One effective way of bringing kids back is by offering them a good school within 3km of where they stay. A functional school with even one empathetic teacher can bring down dropout rates. Children will be children. If they are getting bored or beaten up, they will stop going to school. A proper school can help check dropouts, child



Puja Marwaha at the CRY office in Kalikapur. Picture: Pabitra Das

labour as well as early marriages. It makes a difference when parents can be assured that their children are in a protected and happy environment. Reviving non-functional schools is very important.

The other way to tackle the problem is to study a child's home environment. We have often conducted support classes, just to keep the children in school. You work with the kids in school and try to understand their issues. You work with the parents and tell them why the children are better off in school. Changing the attitude of parents and children and providing safe spaces for the latter is a preventive approach. We sometimes also do village-level enrolments, try to figure out how many kids are out of school while their names might be in the register, and bring them back through bridge classes.

How effective are midday meal schemes and mobile schools in bringing back the truant child?
Nourishment is important and a big part of education, but the school should be accessible first. I am not in support of mobile schools. They are a romantic notion. I prefer permanent structures. A safe, happy space that offers nourishment is what I will go for.

Has the quality of education improved in the state in the last five years?

Availability of schools across the country has improved. There is a classroom now, and often within a functional building as against teaching in the open. But equipping schools with proper teaching material and infrastructure is still a long way off. Teachers are few, most are not adequately trained.

There are no separate functioning toilets for girls. There will be a toilet but it will be locked or there will be no water. So it's not enough to say we have opened a school and got a teacher. We see a great improvement in education infrastructure in Bengal. What we require here is less politicisation of teachers. They should be more motivated and better trained. Let teachers teach and not be involved in other duties. If we focus on quality upper-primary and secondary education in schools, the dropout rates will go down. If villages have separate child protection committees, kids can be supervised and tracked down. Such changes will make Bengal a safer in five years.

If a child drops out twice, what are their chances of completing their education?

Very, very low. You have to do a lot of work within the community, find a significant adult who can be a mentor and help the child back to school. A mentor can help change a child's mindset.

What will be or has been your dream project in the state?

Our project on changing young mindsets in red-light areas, with partner NGO Diksha, is my favourite. Through it, we have transformed the lives of many children of sex workers. When you are born to a sex worker, you are convinced that is your future too. Our project has helped these kids dream of different careers and helped build their confidence to achieve the impossible. I would like to replicate the model all over India and bring about an attitudinal change in all children, who are also marginalised by caste, religion or poverty.

How can you empower an abused child and bring them back to the mainstream?

You have a window between 14 and 20 years when you can turn back the damage done. It requires establishing a safe space in school and within one's home; members should be happy to take a child back. It also requires a thorough psycho-social counselling process. Without trauma redressal, rehabilitation will not happen. If we don't address the trauma, the kids will carry it for life. They will never be functional in any way. Make the right counselling process available. We should also stop treating abused kids as statistics; we should treat them as individual stories. We don't have access to many high-quality counsellors in the country, yet there should be individual care plans for rehabilitating children.

Compared to other states, how has Bengal been able to tackle child marriage problems?

Bengal is definitely better off than Rajasthan and UP. There is more awareness here. But the strange thing about child marriage is it refuses to go away. Every time we think that we have found a solution, a new version emerges.

Suddenly we are identifying more child marriages in urban spaces. Families think they are safer when the problem is someone else's. Urban parents think the best solution to stop a child from running away with a boyfriend is to marry her off. I have heard all kinds of excuses for child marriage. Till we stop seeing girls as 'Eve', with their sexuality posing a threat to society, this problem will not go. Child marriage has a really troublesome way of popping back in different ways and in different levels of society.

What law would you like to see being passed?

I would like a law that treats children as children, giving them legal protection, care and help to become adults. A law that guarantees children more safe zones and does not hinder their mobility. Don't shut them up. Treat children differently, understand it's a special group. Don't make childhood a waiting period for adulthood.

Chandreyee Ghose



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