

3. A New Beginning for Mani and Murugan

I teach at the Madhyamik Vidya Mandir School in Santa Cruz, Mumbai. In January 2018, I joined the 'Balrakshak' programme. Our main task was to bring out-of-school children into mainstream education. One day, I was returning home from a Balrakshak training session when I came across two brothers – Murugan and Mani Pandya. They were sitting by the roadside, munching on raw mangoes. Smiling at them, I asked, 'Where do you live?' They pointed to the hut across the road. 'Do you go to school?' I wanted to know. They replied that they had never been to school. I visited their home the very next day. Their father was sleeping outside the hut. He seemed unwell. Their mother and sister had gone out to collect garbage.

I spoke to some of the neighbors, and learned several details about the family. They had come to Mumbai from Tamil Nadu some 20 years earlier, and had been living on the streets ever since. Mani and Murugan had three brothers and two sisters. One brother was in jail, another was a drug addict; the third, who drove an auto rickshaw, did not live with the family. One sister had been swept away in the fast-flowing waters of an open drain the previous monsoon. The father was bedridden. The mother and the surviving sister worked as garbage collectors, and had to make ends meet somehow.

I was certain I must have seen Mani and Murugan loitering about in the area before – but, as a Balrakshak, I was now looking at them with new eyes. Once, I noticed injuries on Murugan's face, which the boys were very reluctant to discuss. I gave him some first aid, and took him to a doctor. The neighbours told me that Murugan had done this to himself in a fit of rage when he could not get the money to buy drugs. I did not want to be too hard on the boys, for fear of their blocking me out of their lives, and so I didn't say much.

However, the situation was getting worse day by day. I was also in touch with Nutan Maghade 'Ma'am' from the Samata Shiksha section of the Maharashtra Academic Authority (MAA), Pune, and with Vaishali Shinde 'Ma'am', Balrakshak Coordinator for Mumbai district, about the problem. Acting on their advice, I decided to get both boys into the Support programme. I spoke to their

mother about the necessity of getting them off the drugs, and she agreed. We decided to take Mani and Murugan to the Child Welfare Committee in Mankhurd. Their rickshaw driver brother, who was supposed to drive us there in his auto rickshaw, did not show up, but their other brother – himself an addict – helped us find an auto. When Mani asked where we were going, I said we were going for their school admission.

The President of the Child Welfare Committee received the boys warmly, and took care of the paperwork for their admission to Support. It was end July when Mani and Murugan were finally admitted into Support. I assured them that they would be looked after well, and would soon be going to school. They have been treated by a team of expert doctors, and are free of addiction. Their education has already begun, informally, at the NGO, and I am happy to say that they will be enrolled in school from the next academic year.

Boys thank of me often. Whenever I visit them, my heart fills with happiness when I look at their eager young faces. I wish them good health, and a bright future.

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