



SAKSHAM - Building CAPability

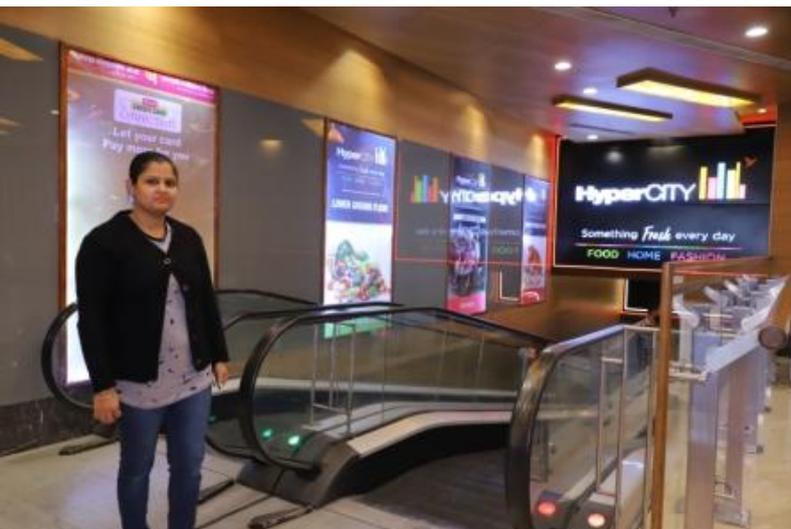
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Courses:

- Retail Management
- ITES (IT Enabled Services)
- Beauty Expert

Duration: 3 months

Location: Paschim Vihar, New Delhi





Voices of courage, commitment & confidence

When you speak to the girls at SAKSHAM in Delhi, one striking characteristic that stands out in every interaction is their confidence. The way they stand erect with their head held high and the spring in their step, the unmistakable self-belief in their voices, every single aspect of their persona, makes you feel like you're talking to someone who knows her mind and is unequivocal in her expression. It feels good to see the well groomed young girls who speak without flinching. But apparently, that's the quality they all lacked before they enrolled for the CAP-PLAN program. That they came from the poorest backgrounds is a foregone fact. Stories of hunger, humiliation and deprivation are aplenty. However, the most significant existential crisis for every one of them without a single exception has been the fact that they were born as girls! All of them grew up feeling and at some point believing that being a girl is a disadvantage and in some cases a curse. While their male siblings gallivanted without a care in the world, whether they attended school or not, whether they took any

responsibility or not, whether they cared for the parents or not, just by the virtue of being born a male, they grew up believing they were God's gift to humanity. Well, that may be a shocker for the educated urban populace but in the disadvantaged sections of Indian society, the belief system that the male of the human species is superior to the female is still prevalent and how! You get a sinking feeling in your solar plexus when these girls narrate their stories with a certain acceptance and a whole lot of helplessness that comes with being a girl. But then they do rise like the proverbial phoenix warming the cockles of your heart and sensibilities. The gloom you feel when they speak about fighting at every step only because they are girls gets replaced with an optimism, with a feel good factor when you hear how they proactively changed the story of their lives and made the best of the opportunity that was given to them by SAKSHAM.

What's most heartening is the transformation that has taken place not only in their overall personalities but their lives, on the whole. From learning to survive in the most trying circumstances, where having enough to eat is a luxury to generating enough resources to lead a good life and daring to dream about the future, these girls have achieved a remarkable feat with their grit and determination. Hand holding them on the path to independence is the team of mobilizers and facilitators at CAP-Plan centres who are the true heroes of this story. Their commitment to make the program happen by reaching out to the most difficult to reach target communities inspires them to face the challenges head on and not give up regardless of the situations, makes the goal of this program achievable.

There are survivors and there are CAP-PLAN Saksham beneficiaries who are embodiments of the spirit of survival who not only rise above all limitations that are the consequence of severe lack of financial resources and make the best of the opportunity that the mobilisers happen to bring to their door step. Each story is distinct with its unique underlying theme. Their circumstances are different but the issues are more or less similar. There is a common thread binding them all – that of inequality and age-old suppression. And the way they rise above it all reminds you of the proverbial phoenix that rises from the ashes to rebuild itself with its spirit intact. Read on...

Babita, 19 yrs, resident of Muzaffarnagar, Beautician: Clad in jeans and a formal shirt and a pull over, 20 year old Babita is a smartly dressed striking young lady but when you look into her eyes, you can see a shadow of sadness. Even when she attempts to smile, it doesn't reach her eyes. She starts off confidently speaking about her work as a beautician and her plans for the future to set up her own beauty parlour at some point but when you ask her about her childhood,



you realise you've opened up the Pandora's box. Half way into her narration, tears rolled down her cheeks and the bottled up hurt, humiliation and rejection surface leaving you feeling guilty for having brought her face-to-face with her demons. "I think I was 3 or 4 when I heard the first comment from a relative, ironically also a female, my paternal aunt. She was lamenting that my mother has 3 daughters and that is such a huge burden. My poor mom was bending her head as if it was her fault," says Babita, who has 2 sisters and 2 brothers."

Her father, a painter, barely earned enough to feed his family of 7 and her mother was constantly on her feet to ensure some semblance of order in their severely underprivileged life.

"I've seen my mother drinking a glass of water because there was nothing left for her after feeding all of us with roti and dal. I would ask her why she doesn't eat along with us and she would say she's not hungry or at times that she had upset stomach. When I was little, I believed her but as I grew up I understood the real reason. So whenever she said she's not hungry, my sisters and I would also say we're not hungry. We wouldn't eat until she joined us. Now, the strange practice in our home was that all the men – my father and 2 brothers ate first. More often than not, they finished everything that was served and

asked for second helpings. My mother would reserve a part of it for us to eat later. The guys had no clue whether she ate or not. We – my sisters and I – would ask my mother why the guys had to eat first and why we shouldn't join them even if we're hungry and she would reply that's how it works. And if we pestered her, she would break down. We gave up because we couldn't bear to see her cry." And she relives that memory, Babita's eyes get moist and even as she tries to get a grip on her overwhelming emotions, tears roll down her cheeks and she sobs uncontrollably. After the outburst, she apologises, "Sorry, don't know why that happened." We feel sorry too because we do know why that happened. We understand that while the girls in such a milieu may grow to accept their circumstances and the disparity between the genders as a fact of life but the pain points never go away even if they learn to live with the hard truths of their lives.

Life went on and the undernourished girls grew into slim and pretty teenagers. Now, even that was a bone of contention for the people around them. "Everybody would scare my mother that good looking girls need to be kept in control or they will bring disgrace to the family. While my brothers passed their exams with great difficulty, we scored high marks and passed our school final exams with good percentage. We would help our mother in household chores, sweeping, swabbing, washing clothes and dishes and then study. Whereas, our brothers just had to focus on their studies. Yet, we girls were not allowed to go to college after we completed our +2. My younger sisters were still in school and I was getting restless. I was itching to do something constructive. I couldn't pressurise my parents to send me to the college because I knew they had no money. But I wanted to do something, find some way to make my life better by doing something constructive with my free time. I had nothing in my hands and all I could do was have conversations with God. I would ask him why he made me a girl when it's such a disadvantage to be one. That's when CAP mobilisation team knocked on our door. And when I heard what was on offer, it felt like God had answered my prayers. They convinced my parents that they should let me pursue what I want. And they agreed mainly because it was free. Also, because it is an all girls class and that I would eventually work in a place which is exclusively for women. I still believe that it was divine intervention indeed."

Life transformed dramatically for Babita when she enrolled in October 2017, for Beautician's course in CAP's Vocational Training Centre in Paschim Vihar, Delhi. "Because of years of suppression, I was timid. I would barely raise my head let alone looking into the eyes of people I spoke to. But Himanshu Sir and other facilitators brought me out of the shell I had retreated into. Gradually, I opened up as I began following their instructions and advice. I put my mind and heart into the course and passed out with good marks because I knew this was my chance to build my life."

Babita works as a beautician and earns Rs. 10,000 as her salary. "I am still on probation and my boss has assured me of a raise after 6 months. I am earning more than my father and I feel good about it. My mother was my only support and now she's extremely proud of me. I want to do well in my career and give everything to my parents and my sisters that I never had. My brothers are hugely disapproving of what I do and keep telling my mother that I should be married off. But I don't feel bad about their attitude. It's their problem. My only focus is on to excel at my work and achieve everything I dreamt of. During my Beautician's course I also learnt to manage my time and money. It gave me a lot of clarity. I see myself owning and running a successful beauty parlour in 5 years. Until then, I told my parents I am not interested in marriage. My brothers can marry if they wish to as they are older to me in any case. I reclaimed my life thanks to CAP PLAN's SAKSHAM program. I look forward to a secure future in which deprivation will have no place, whatsoever. Life seems normal now. I feel lighter and more in control of my circumstances. Now, I feel good about being a girl. I have no words to express my gratitude." Babita's attitude of gratitude says it all!

Devpreet, 22, ITES: She is as assertive as can be. But there is underlying defiance against unfair norms though she doesn't say it in so many words. When you delve deeper you understand where she is coming from and empathise with why she feels what she does. When Devpreet makes statements

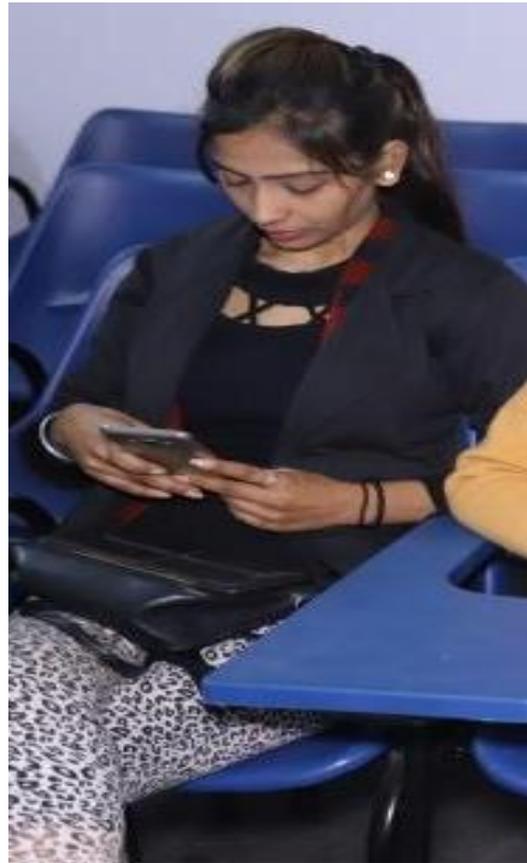


like, "Left to me, I will never marry," she sounds like a seasoned cynic and you tend to forget that she has just about crossed the 2nd decade of her life. Daughter of a petty trader, Devpreet has 5 sisters and her father is a petty trader earning barely enough to make the two ends meet. Hardworking to another level, her day starts at 5 AM when she leaves home to reach her work place and once she gets off work at 5 PM, she attends classes for her BA course. In addition to working at a BPO where she handles sales process, she is also pursuing her BCom honours. "We're five sisters and my parents miss having a son. My whole endeavour is to become the son they always wanted so that they can feel happy," she says summing up the goal of her existence, "I would like to take up Chartered Accountancy once I complete my under grad. My ultimate aim is to become a successful business woman with 20-30 people working for me. I earn Rs, 11,000 today and I am sure I can achieve everything I want if I set my mind to it."

Growing up, Devpreet would constantly see her mother at the receiving end of their relatives' barbs and taunts of not bearing a son. "Somehow, I felt I had to be that son. I used to cry myself to sleep when I was younger wondering why God made me a girl. I joined hockey team at school and became a very good player. I would dress like a boy and behave like one. Somewhere along the line, I realised that I am not one and I should make the best of my life by accepting my identity. And that's what I did," she says sounding a lot older than her age. After being compelled to drop out of education after her 12th due to severe

financial constraints, Devpreet had begun to lose heart. “My father was suggesting I join him in running his business. But I didn’t want to. My sisters were already working with him and I didn’t see any value addition in my joining the same business. I felt it would be a mistake of putting all eggs in one basket. I wanted to work and earn my own money besides being of help to my parents. Even though I had passed my 12th grade with good marks, it was not enough for me to get a job. I was at a loss and had nobody to guide me. I was at my wit’s end when one of my friends mentioned that she had heard of free courses being conducted by CAP through a mobilising team who had come to her house. I jumped when I heard the word ‘free.’ Both of us went to the centre and enrolled for ITES course. The teachers were excellent. Besides making us thorough in our subjects, they taught us many more important life skills. The best part was the way they prepared us for the job interview with mock sessions. I had become so confident that I cleared 3 rounds of my first job interview with ease. I got the first job I had applied for. I was told by the interview board that they were very impressed with my confidence and communication skills. Trust me, I had neither of them when I walked into CAP centre the first time. Rohit Sir and Kavita Ma’am worked very hard on making us the best versions of ourselves. We will always remember them with utmost gratitude,” says the youngster who is amazingly articulate and clear headed. She has a list of things she wants to achieve by 25, one of them being sending her younger sister to a music school. “She signs beautifully. I would like to put her in the right school that can hone her skills. And I would like to make my mother financially secure so that she doesn’t have to suppress basic desires like buying a sari or a suit. I have seen her doing that for as long as I can remember. As for myself, I will never marry. I have seen what marriage does to women in our society and I don’t want to become one of those long suffering, sacrificing women. Never. Not after I have found my identity after a long crisis and have learnt to cherish being a woman. I would never want to lose sight of that,” she says grinning from side to side. Pretty smart, this girl! Embodiment of SAKSHAM spirit.

Shikha, ITES: 19 year old Shikha's life so far is straight out of films. When you hear her story, you wonder if truth inspires fiction or the other way round. Eventhough she is in the last year of her teenage, her demeanour is a lot older. You understand what makes her so serious at such a tender age when she narrates her experiences. Eldest in her family of 2 brothers, 3 sisters, she has had to shoulder responsibility from the time she was in 4th standard. She was 9 years old when her mother met with a fire accident which left her scarred and mildly deformed. "She suffered a lot for a very long time and still does in fact," says Shikha her eyes tearing up at the not so distant memories, "Her skin was extremely



sensitive and she couldn't bear any exposure to slightest heat. There was nobody else at home and there were 5 of my siblings and an uncle, who lives with us, to feed every day. I had no choice but to learn cooking. My mother would instruct from her bed and I would follow. I had blisters on my hands constantly because of that." Shikha pauses a lot when she speaks. She is full of enthusiasm when she speaks about her present life and future plans but when you ask her about her childhood, you can see a palpable change in her mood. Her eyes have a faraway look and she considers every sentence she speaks carefully as if she is sifting a lot of stuff in her mind either because she doesn't want to go there or because she doesn't want you to see where she has been. But whatever she chooses to share with you in itself is tragic beyond imagination.

So when Shikha was two year old and had just about begun walking steadily on her feet, her father picked her up and wanted to throw her in the well. The reason – he was expecting that a son would be born and he wanted no daughters. Luckily, her mother grabbed her in time and broke down clutching her first born to her bosom as her husband cursed her for having brought

misfortune to the family by giving birth to a girl. “My mother went through hell. We lived in one room, 6 of us, our parents and an uncle. She came from a good background; her father was the village sarpanch and they were well off but she got married into a family which was backward not just economically but also in their thinking and outlook towards life. Women, in my father’s household, had to cover their face with ‘ghoonghat’ (veil) and were not allowed to step out of the house unless accompanied by a male member. She endured a lot because of us. That’s why I was waiting to grow up so that I could work and look after her.” She sobs as she narrates and then the long pause is back again. After a while she regains her composure and continues, “My father’s whole anger at his own misery was always directed towards my mother and us sisters. My brothers always got the best treatment. He and his brother would carry the boys on their shoulders and treat them as if they are special. And we always got yelled at and sometimes beaten for the slightest reason, sometimes even without one. My sisters and I somehow believed that it was our fault that we were born as girls. The only thing that I feel very grateful for is that at least they sent us to the school even if it was a ramshackle Government school.”

A die-hard optimist that she is, Shikha made the best of the school’s limited resources and passed out of school with a good marks sheet. But there again she was met with a roadblock. Her father refused to send her to the college because it costs money. “I had almost given up when the CAP mobilisation team knocked on our door. For about a year after my 12th, I had taken up work as a group dancer for Punjabi music videos and films. I was good at dancing and slowly I started getting steady work. My father did not say anything because I was earning decent money and paying for expenses at home. He had lost his job and my earnings helped to keep the kitchen fire burning. Honestly, he had no choice. I still take up dancing assignments on weekends and holidays to supplement my income.” Shikha completed the 3 month course in ITES and works for a banking BPO. She earns Rs. 10,000 per month and is pursuing her graduation through correspondence. “Kavita ma’am and Rohit sir (CAP facilitators) taught me to face all odds and be strong always. I gained confidence, learnt to manage my time and money other than thorough knowledge during the course. I am able to juggle my work, studies and a part

time assignment because of the lessons they taught me. They are no less than angels," she says with a twinkle in her eyes and no pauses this time.

Ask her what the biggest change in her life has been after she came to SAKSHAM, she says, "I learnt to laugh heartily and I look forward to my future. Once I meet my financial goals and complete my studies, I would like to get married to a good boy who will understand me, encourage me to work and above all, kind hearted."

Khushboo, 19, ITES & Retail: Khushboo is very pretty but comes across as a passive, timid girl but when she starts talking, you realise that looks are deceptive indeed. She is strong willed, speaks assertively and knows her mind. When you say that to her, she responds, “You should have seen me before I attended the course. I couldn’t voice my opinion even in front of my close friends forget about speaking in public. I would get anxiety attacks if I had to talk to strangers. Even if I lost my way on the road, I wouldn’t have the courage to ask anybody for directions. I was a complete loser,”



she laughs. Eldest of 3 sisters, Khushboo taught in a school for an year after she was compelled to drop out of school after her +2 exams. “My dad is a car painter. My mom is a very quiet, under confident woman. Trust me, I was just like her before SAKSHAM. Sometimes I think, if she had got an opportunity when she was younger like I did with CAP PLAN, her life would have been better. I think I got lucky. When I say this to her, she says if I become successful, that will make up for all the hardships she and my dad went through to bring us up. My father’s earnings were meagre and erratic. We struggled a lot.”

Khushboo’s main achievement at the SAKSHAM centre was the self-confidence she developed during the course. “I would start stuttering and stammering when the attention was on me. The first time Kavita ma’am would ask me to stand up and introduce myself to the other class mates, I started trembling severely. I couldn’t open my mouth. But she was very patient with me. She told me to sit down and speak. That eased me a bit but I was still not audible when I spoke.

This went on for a fortnight. Then one day Rohit sir and Kavita ma'am sat me down after the class and spoke to me and advised me to speak in front of the mirror when I was alone. They gave me tips on body language and speech. I followed everything sincerely. Everybody was shocked at my transformation. I must be the only girl in the entire batch who changed so dramatically," she says proudly.

Khushboo earned Rs. 2000 teaching in the neighbourhood school after her +2 exams and gave it to her parents to run their house. "I fell in love with teaching. The management also appreciated my work a lot and promised to give me a raise but I quit after I joined SAKSHAM. I completed two courses ITES & Retail. My parents were reluctant to send me to work but Kavita ma'am came home and convinced them. I got through my interview with a Finance company and earned Rs. 8000. My parents supported me and encouraged me after listening to Kavita ma'am. Recently, I went for another interview with SBI credit card division in Rajouri and got selected. They are offering me Rs. 13,000. My parents can't believe that at my age I am earning so much. I plan to take up the new job from next month. I will save and invest for my future." Khushboo's neighbours are disapproving of a girl working and taunt her parents because Khushboo works long hours and returns at 8 PM. "I get off work at 7 PM and it takes an hour for me to reach home. The colony we live in is full of narrow minded, small town mentality people. But I don't give any importance to them. Initially my mom would get very upset but when I told her that she should feel proud that I am building my life and securing our future. Now she has become stronger and gives it back to people who talk nonsense."

Khushboo's biggest contribution to her family has been, "We don't go to sleep with half stomach any more. I took my parents and sisters to a Salman Khan movie recently. He's our favourite actor. I even bought Samosas for all of us during the interval. It was heaven. We couldn't have imagined such an outing every before. My parents kept saying that I shouldn't waste money but tell me, what is the point of earning money, if I can't give my family what they want. Money is meant to make our lives better, right?"

Kajal, 19, ITES: For a girl who moved to Delhi after being born and bred in a remote village, Kajal is quite self assured. Youngest and the only girl in the family, she is pampered by her 3 elder brothers and parents. “Actually, they are very over protective. They don’t



let me do anything. For them, the ultimate goal is to see me married. My brothers wouldn’t let me take up a job but Rohit sir came home and convinced them. After that, they changed but they keep looking for suitable boys for me,” she says complainingly, “I told them very clearly that I will get married only after I am financially independent to a guy who will let me work for as long as I want to. And guess what is the strangest part? When I went for my job interview, the lady who interviewed me asked why I needed a job when I have 3 elder brothers who have jobs. I turned around and asked her how she can ask me such a question that too being a woman. I thought I blew it but she was very impressed with my attitude and I got the job.”

Kajal works for Policy Bazaar and earns Rs. 8000 and is simultaneously pursuing her BA Final in Political science. “I love economics but our Political Science lecturer is so good that I fared better in the subject and decided to pursue it. My goal is to do MA. Hopefully, I will complete it. Actually, when I make up my mind, I can achieve anything. The only weakness I haven’t been able to overcome is that I cannot talk to boys. I am not if that is a weakness because it doesn’t stop me from living my life in anyway,” she says speaking nonstop. “I never had any problems with my confidence levels but I couldn’t speak a word of English before and I had never touched a computer before SAKSHAM. I learnt both here and my superiors are very impressed with my work and focus. I want to buy my own house. I want to get into civil services but I have no clue how to do that. And I am not sure how my parents and brothers will react to it. If life supports me the way it has always done so far, I may be able to achieve that one too.”

Soni, 18, ITES: She's frail bordering on malnourished but her spirit makes up for her delicate frame. She speaks with absolute clarity and has well defined future goals. She grew up being looked down upon for her complexion and



gender. "I don't understand people's obsession with fair skin and beauty," says Soni when asked what her challenges in life are, "What matters is how well you have come up in life and how confident you are to face difficult situations in life." You don't expect such a strong statement from an 18 year old but Soni's maturity belies her age. "When you grow up in difficult circumstances with everybody judging you based on your looks and financial position, you grow up much beyond your age," she explains putting things in context. For Soni, the toughest battle has been with people who judge girls because of their gender and appearance. "Bad enough, I am born as a girl in a poor family, added to that I am not attractive. But guess what? I didn't let any of this come in my way. I have always been confident in my skin and am not apologetic about being a girl. I have never experienced hesitation or shyness. I believe that if you've faith in yourself and your abilities, nobody can put you down."

Soni had dropped out of school after her +2 and had joined an English speaking course which was being offered free of cost in her neighbourhood. "I couldn't get a job because I was not qualified. I had no special skills or talents. I hadn't realised until then that it's not enough to pass 12th exams. That too, with a good percentage. There was an NGO which was conducting free English course. I thought if I learnt English language, it might help me find a job. I wanted to start somewhere, find some job. It was very crucial for me to work because my family's financial condition was in doldrums. I had to support them and make myself financially stable too. But I wasn't able to get any job."

Frustrated and disappointed at repeated failures in securing a job, Soni was at her wit's end when she stumbled upon information regarding free courses being conducted by CAP-PLAN's SAKSHAM. "I heard about it from a neighbour who was given some pamphlets about the courses. I promptly found out details and went to the centre in October, 2017. I was not interested in being a beautician but love computers. So I enrolled for ITES course. I had never seen a computer from close quarters ever in my life before. When I touched it for the first time and turned it on, I felt very happy. It was a dream come true for me. I learnt a lot other than subjects that were being taught. The visiting faculty opened our eyes and gave us exposure to the world outside. It helped us a lot. The faculty taught us through mock interviews how to get through an interview. The training was so perfect that I got through my first job interview after completing the ITES course. I work for Landmark Insurance company and earn Rs. 10,000. It's a lot of money. I earn more than my father. His salary is Rs. 6000 that too at his age. My parents were very happy and proud when I gave my first salary to them."

Soni's dreams include settling her parents financially. Being the first born in the family, she feels her younger brother and sister are her responsibility. "I will support them for as long as they want to study," she says seriously, "They shouldn't go through what I did. I have not given up on my studies though. I plan to complete my BA. I want to reach great heights in my career. I want to travel. I love travelling and meeting new people. My parents want me to get married but I feel I am a kid still. I will definitely get married when I am 28 only if the boy is well settled and responsible with no vices. I hate people who're addicted to alcohol. I have seen so many lives ruined because of addictions. I don't mind staying single if I don't find a decent man but I don't think my parents will allow that and also I feel it's not practical for a girl to be alone in our society," she says once again displaying a steady head on her young but firm shoulders.

Kavita, 19, ITES: Kavita's parents belong to Uttarakhand and moved to Delhi when she was in the 6th standard. "Life was very different in our village. There were not many schools and colleges but it was a lot simpler to get by. We could walk to any place we wanted. There was no traffic and people were used to not expecting much from life," describes Kavita, "I have no idea how my life or my siblings' would have been if our parents didn't move to Delhi but I am glad they did. Basically, my father had no means of income back in the village. Farming was getting



increasingly difficult and there was no other means of livelihood. Sometimes, we didn't have enough to eat and survived on milk which was from the cow our grandparents owned and we didn't have to pay for it. But how long can that go on, right?" she asks.

Like the rest of the girls at SAKSHAM, Kavita too had dropped out of school after 12th standard and was at a loose end. "Basically, we went to Govt school where we got free education. But my father was in no position to put me through college because they were beyond our means. I had reconciled to the fact that I can't expect much from life because of our financial constraints. But I had a strong urge to work and become financially self reliant and when your intentions are strong, doors open somewhere somehow. That's what happened. One of my friends found out about the free courses at SAKSHAM and both of us enrolled here. "I am a fighter. I don't give up easily. I believe

that we can change whatever we want to in life. We ust need to be mentally strong and have the ability to wait it out when things are not conducive.”

Kavita’s grit and perseverance aided her in completing the course with a good percentage and find a job. She works for an insurance company in their BPO and earns Rs. 10,000 per month. “I strongly believe that nobody can help you unless you fight for yourself. Whenever my friends complain that their parents don’t support them, I always tell them that they should stand their ground; eventually parents will come around. That’s what I did with my parents. They were of the opinion that girls should stay at home, get married and have children but I told them that it’s not my goal. I will marry only after I stand on my own feet. Even a man respects a financially independent woman more,” she elaborates, “My parents trust me now and stand by me and my convictions. My sister lacks that clarity, so I have decided to get her enrolled at SAKSHAM in the next batch. 3 months here are enough to set us up for life. It’s such a powerful course,” she concludes.



Gurpreeti, 19, Retail: She looks like a kid. Her parents brought her up to believe that boys and girls are equal. Eldest of 3 girls, Gurpreeti was loved by her parents, grandparents and extended family. Everything was perfect in the department of emotional well being but calamity struck when her father, a petty trader, fell ill and his business collapsed. Her mother, a home maker, was a pious woman who cared for her family like every woman does but had never ventured out of home ever. Lack of education and exposure made her incapable of figuring out what to do. Gurpreeti's grandparents took care of them for as long as they could. "There comes a point in every adult's life when they want to be financially independent and of some use to their families. I was no different. The moment I completed my high school, I felt a strong need to look for a job. I felt it was my duty to contribute in some way to improve our financial situation. My grandparents were getting old and it seemed unfair that they should continue to shoulder the responsibility of providing for us," she narrates her share of challenges.

But there was a hitch. Her high school education was not good enough for her to get a good job. That's when one of her friends told her about CAP PLAN SAKSHAM's courses. "At first, I was sceptical. There was no way I would go and

ask my grandparents to pay for the course but I was reassured when I came to know that these courses were free for people like us who came from impoverished backgrounds.”

Encouraged by her family to pursue the course, Gurpreeti enrolled herself for the Retail course. “Everything about the course from day 1 was productive. We were taught all the necessary skills in addition to regular skills that prepare us for work life. From developing self confidence to the right body language, from facing an interview to planning time & money, the course had everything taken care of for a youngster to become suitably employed,” says Gurpreeti.

On successful completion of the course, she was sent for an interview to Burger King. “This was my first job interview but I didn’t feel nervous one bit. All the education and training had made me a confident girl. I breezed through the interview and succeeded in getting the job in the department of counter sales. My job involves speaking to the customers, taking their orders, coordinating with the kitchen and deliver the order. I also handle orders that come on the phone and online. My supervisors are happy with my work and are very impressed with my efficiency and speed. I can only thank SAKSHAM for making me capable of handling the job and my life at all levels. Every girl in my position hopes and prays for such an opportunity but I got it. I am blessed. God bless SAKSHAM,” she says as she excuses herself to attend to the bee line of customers on the other side of the counter.

Sheetal, 19, Retail: When we are speaking to Gurpreeti's immediate boss to get a feedback on our students, he mentions a bright young achiever who is bound to go places who worked in another branch. He mentions her name as Sheetal. Equipped with her address, we land



up at Burger King in a mall. We set out in search of this youngster about whom we had heard such amazing praises.

We find her reeling off the names of items that are on the menu to a customer across the counter. We wait on the sidelines as we watch her take the order efficiently in a no-nonsense manner and passing it on to the concerned colleague. In her pleasant professional tone, she faces us gearing up to take another order. When she learns about our intent to meet her, she smiles and asks us to get the necessary permission from her manager. Once the formalities are done, she turns to us confidently with an air of self assurance.

Sheetal is happy to hear the compliments on her from the store manager of another branch. "I worked there till last month. Within two months, I was promoted and transferred to this branch. I did my work sincerely because that's what we learn as a part of the program at SAKSHAM. So my promotion came as a pleasant surprise. But this is just the beginning. I am determined to make constant progress and achieve greater heights in my career," says Sheetal mentioning that financial independence is the most empowering feeling in this world.

Born into a family that had borne the misfortune of losing their properties and income to an internal family litigation, Sheetal was determined to make a life for herself as soon as she completed her studies and that's exactly what she did. "SAKSHAM prepared me to take life head on and make a mark in my

profession. The change they are bringing about in the lives of girls like us is phenomenal. I have 2 younger sisters and a brother. I look after their educational expenditure and contribute to the family kitty. My long term goal is to have my own house and drive my own car. Until then I won't rest. I haven't taken any offs so far except Sundays. I was taught at SAKSHAM that there are no shortcuts to success. The only way to reach your goal is hard work. Three cheers to CAP Foundation," she concludes as she signs off for the day.

Lakshmi, 29, Beautician: Her life and challenges are completely different from the rest of her batch mates. To begin with, she happens to be married and a mother of a 3- year- old boy who has just begun attending school. “I



haven't gone through major traumas, honestly. My struggle has been more with myself because I have definite ideas about how I want my life to be. My parents were very loving and caring and still are. I didn't have to fight discrimination or prejudice because I am a woman. In fact, my mother always told me that financial independence makes a woman stronger. She did not want me to go through what she did because of lack of money. Having said that, both my father and my husband are very easy going peaceful souls. But I have certain expectations from myself and my constant efforts are to live up to those expectations,” says Lakshmi who grew up in a huge joint family where ‘there was limited space to live but abundant space in one another’s hearts’ in her words.

“Money is very important if we want to access good things in life,” says Lakshmi, “I realised this very early and started working soon after my 12th in the ministry office. I learnt on the job and did very well. I continued working for 5 years and had to take a break when I gave birth to my son. When I wanted to get back to work, I realised that a lot had changed during those 5 years. I spoke to my husband and he advised me to look at something which is closer home so that I can supervise my son whenever necessary and also sustain the work in the longer run.”

Lakshmi didn't realise how tough it could be to get a job that she looked for. “I happened to chance upon SAKSHAM and when I attended the introductory class, I realised that being a beautician would work for me perfectly. I could

work for a while and start my own beauty parlour over a period of time after saving enough money. I completed the 3 month course and got placed on SHE beauty parlour which is a stone's throw away from my house. I have been working here for a salary of Rs. 10,000 and go home during breaks to keep an eye on my son after he comes from school. The owner is very understanding and lets me balance work and home."

In keeping with her plans, Lakshmi saves half her salary so that she can start her own parlour some day. "My husband has always been a very nice man. When I wasn't working he would try as best as he could to provide me with whatever I asked for. But I used to feel bad. With our son's growing needs and the inflation on a high, we struggled a fair bit. We would never go out on weekends or holidays anywhere because we couldn't afford. Now, I feel so good, more importantly I feel free to spend on anything I want without bothering my husband. I am sure he is relieved too though he doesn't say it," smiles Lakshmi.

Lakshmi is also saving for her son's future. "We want to send him to a good private school. Both my husband and I are huge believers in education and we want to give the best to our son," she concludes.

Lakshmi's story clearly demonstrates how a woman's ability to rise above circumstances makes her a winner and gets her closer to achieving her dreams and desires.

Nazish Khan, 19, Beautician: Nazish behaves a lot older than her age, doesn't smile much except when you talk about Salman Khan, doesn't look very upbeat when you ask her about her future plans. "What is the point in planning when I know that nothing is in my hands?" she starts off cynically. Probe a little more and she says, "I am not sure if you know how it is in our society. That's why you're asking me about my future plans." So isn't she happy with her new found



independence, you wonder. "I am absolutely thrilled with my job as a beautician in Make Over beauty parlour. I earn Rs. 8000 and for the first time in my life I feel that I am worth something," she explains. Where is the problem then? "The problem is, in our community, a girl is only as good as the husband she gets. Even if she is a collector, they don't care but if she marries a collector, it's a huge achievement! And I am just a beautician, so I don't want to start flying and dreaming because I don't want to feel bad if my dreams don't count in the scheme of things," she says with an attitude that you may want to call pessimistic, but if you see where she is coming from, you realise that she is only being realistic.

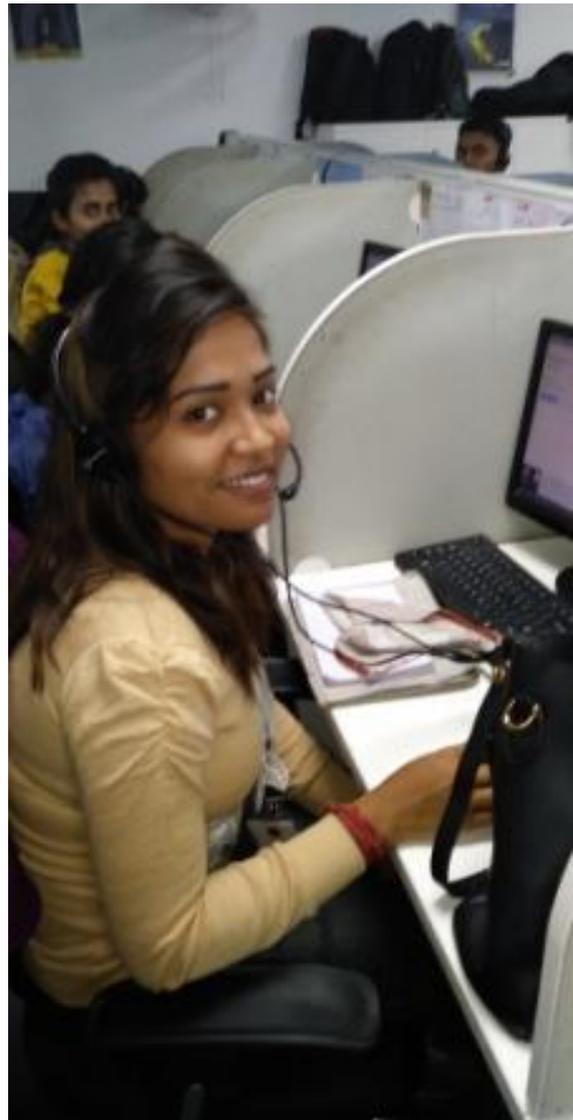
At school, Nazish was excellent in most subjects except Math and English. She would fret about it but her mother would say, "How does it matter? You have to get married soon. Learn cooking and cleaning. It will be more useful in life. Your husband will look after you better if you keep him happy?" Nazish

stopped sharing her concerns about Math and English because nobody at her home understood leave alone empathising with her. Not that she blamed them for it. “My father is a daily wage labourer and my mother never stepped out of the house for anything. I don’t expect them to understand my concerns. I tried to adjust and compromise as much as I could because I knew there was no way out. In fact, after I dropped out of school, I would spend all my time doing household chores. When Vijay sir came to our colony to create awareness about the courses, I got very excited but was scared to voice my opinion. But somehow, the miracle happened. My parents actually asked me to take up the beautician course because Vijay sir said there will be no boys in the class or workplace. That did the trick.”

Soon, Nazish found herself totally involved with the course. “I loved it. Unlike in my school where we had indifferent teachers, at SAKSHAM I was made to feel important. For the first time, people considered what I said. They made an effort to understand my issues and concerns. They invested time in me to help me overcome my fears and drawbacks,” she says smiling for the first time during our conversation, “I learnt most of what I know today from the course. They were not just training me to be a beautician but also preparing me for life with several additional attributes and skills. I became a better person – more organised and clear headed – by the end of the course.”

Nazish’s father was a relieved man when she started sharing his financial burden two months ago. “I know for a fact that he was happy when I gave him my first salary of Rs.5000 but he doesn’t express it. Honestly, it doesn’t matter if they acknowledge or not ; it’s my duty to look after my family especially my parents. But what is worrisome is that their only concern is to find a groom for me. What I am earning today is just the stipend. Once I complete my training in the beauty parlour, I will get a confirmation of my job and a raise of Rs. 3000. The owner has promised to pay me Rs. 8000 after 3 months. I know I am good and I will do well. If only, they let me be and live my life, with or without marriage. But I know it’s wishful thinking. I hope you understand why I don’t make plans for my future,” she asks a pertinent question and all we can do is hope for the best and pray that Nazish and girls like her find their voice and their rightful place in the world.

Sneha, 19, ITES: When she was a little girl, somebody asked her what she wanted to be when she grows up and Sneha replied 'pathrakaar' (Journalist). But she did not understand what it meant. All she knew was the fact that she loved all those men and women who appeared on TV with a microphone in their hands running around important people and situations to get some bytes for their viewers. "I always felt it's the most noble profession in this world after doctors. They put their lives at risk to bring us latest news and happenings," she elaborates, "even those who are a part of the entertainment channels have to do so much constantly to keep us interested in their programs. But I have no idea what to do to become one. My second love is computers. Aren't they amazing? I am so fortunate to get the opportunity



to learn computers and work in this field," says the 19-year-old who is not only affable but also super confident. But apparently, she didn't start out that way. Like many of her contemporaries in the October, 2017 batch of SAKSHAM, Sneha too was an introvert and under confident which is hard to believe when she holds forth on any topic. Sneha

Born into a family that migrated from Uttarakhand, Sneha is the 2nd born amongst 4 siblings. "My elder sister also works in an insurance company. 2 younger brothers are in school," she elaborates, "I was born in a village but my parents moved to Delhi in search of livelihood. Our farm lands had become barren and my parents had to move here for better prospects. I must have been 6 then and my elder sister 8. One of my brothers was a new born and the other hadn't come into this world yet." Sneha's parents tried their best to look

after their children but life was tough. Her father, a petty trader, earns Rs. 4000 a month.

For a couple of years after they moved to Delhi, her father did odd jobs and during those days the going was extremely tough. Hunger was their constant companion. "Even now, none of us can digest if we eat heavy food," she laughs making it lighter, "That's good in a way because we'll never eat unhealthily or get fat." Her optimism and positive attitude are infectious and she spread that inherent cheer amongst her friends in the class.

"I never feel sad about anything," she says, "I guess that's God's way of making it up to me for the bad times we encountered during our early years as a family. My mother always tells me that whatever happens, happens for our good and I strongly believe that. Look at my life today. I have a well paying job, my future is secure, we even go out occasionally to have chat and watch movies. If this is not a miracle, what is? CAP mobilisers reaching out to us in itself is divine help that came our way. I feel blessed and grateful for the way my life has turned out."

Pooja, 19, ITES: She looks older than her age with an attitude to match. Eldest in her family that comprises her parents, a sister and a brother, Pooja takes her responsibility very seriously as far as her work and family are concerned. For her, it is very important to carry out a job to its completion. “I can’t rest until I complete a job I have undertaken. I think it is partly because of the CAP facilitators who inculcated commitment towards our work and partly to my parents who have demonstrated it through their actions. My parents, especially my father has gone hungry at times to ensure that our needs are taken care of. He would tell us he has already eaten before he came home. My mother found this out when he was taken to a doctor for a check up because he was having black outs. The doctor told my mother that he was severely anaemic because of under nourishment. My mother broke down and when she confronted him, he didn’t respond because he couldn’t lie to her in front of the doctor. She came home and shared it with us. I must have been 15 years old then. From then onwards, we ensure that all of us sit down for dinner together. During lunch time, he is at work. So, my mother packs his dabba (lunch box). My father works as a car mechanic and it is a physically strenuous job.”



Pooja’s father earns Rs. 6000, which was barely enough for the family to survive. Eventhough, she and her siblings went to a Govt school, there were basic expenses for their conveyance and clothes.

“One of the most important developments in our life after I started working at Policy Bazaar was that my salary of Rs. 10,000 made everything possible for my parents. I give everything to my mother and take some from her for my expenses. It makes me feel very good that I am able to be of some help and relief to my parents. We have decided to shift my brother and sister to a good private school so that they can have access to good education. All this has

been possible only because of my training conducted by SAKSHAM. There are no words in the dictionary that can express my gratitude towards the mobilisers who came to our locality, the facilitators who taught us everything we needed to know beyond subjects and God, for leading me to the program," she says it all.

What Pooja likes most is the fact that the staff at CAP centre handhold every student until they find a job and stand on their own feet. "They find placements for us, prepare us thoroughly for interviews, build our confidence levels to face the employer and teach us how to manage our time & money after we start earning it. Who does that now-a-days? Not even our own blood relatives," she makes a statement.

Kanchan, 19, Retail Management: She has lived, so far, from one crisis to another. Having gotten immune to stark poverty right from her birth, Kanchan and her family of 5 lived for the day and were happy if they had enough to get by somehow. “My father was a fruit seller, so you can imagine his earning! In a good month, he earned Rs. 3500 a month. I didn’t understand then but now I realise what it must have been for my parents to take care of 3 children and themselves in such a paltry amount? Bananas were the secret of our survival. My father would bring home the fruits that would remain unsold, mostly bananas, sometimes apples and we would fill our stomachs with that. Luckily, they contributed to our good health and we



never fell ill. Thank God for that, my parents couldn’t have afforded medicines,” she says displaying her positive thinking. Looking at the brighter side of their trying situations seems to be the hallmark of these youngsters.

After she completed her 12th standard, Kanchan stayed at home helping her mother with household chores. “Those 15 months when I was idle were the worst days of my life. I hope I’ll never have to see those days in my life, ever. On one hand, nobody was willing to employ me in an office with my qualifications, on the other hand was the sheer torture of being a burden on my parents even after they had educated me as much as they could. I was contemplating if I should take up a job as domestic help in a household or two and I would have, if the mobilisation team hadn’t come to our area. They were distributing pamphlets and clearing people’s doubts when I approached them to check if there was a fee to be paid. Obviously, it would have out of question if I had to but to my good luck, Vijay sir said `no’. I couldn’t believe it so I cross checked again. Yes, it was free of cost! And the best part is I could choose the

course I wanted to enrol for. Can you imagine my feelings? I was a little confused which one I should choose. So they asked me to come to the centre for more clarity. I landed up the next day and after being counselled about my aptitude, I chose Beauty Expert's course because they said I am better suited for that. I am glad I followed their suggestion because I am absolutely cut out for it. I have been working for a beauty parlour now and my employers are very happy with my work," she says summing up her journey.

For Kanchan, the best take away from the course has been clarity in her thought process, confidence in her capabilities and improved inter personal relationships. "I never had friends before. Now, I have made a few good ones. Life seems upbeat and I am looking forward to my future now. I plan to provide for my family even after I get married. I will marry only on that condition," says Kanchan with absolute conviction.

Jyoti, 22, ITES, Credence India Group: Jyoti is a few years older than her batch mates. She keeps admonishing the younger girls if they behave childishly and they find her very serious. And she does look a tad serious for someone who is in her early 20s. “Life made me serious,” she accepts the fact, “While my friends would play with toys when we were kids, I used to be cleaning and washing and helping my mother in household chores. Before going to school, I would assist my mother in getting the house in order and after coming from school, I would complete my homework and get on with household work. I had no time to go and play outside with my friends. In fact, I didn’t cultivate many friends because of I was always busy.”

Jyoti’s father works in a private company as an office assistant and earns Rs. 10,000 which is not so bad for a family of 4 but he has the responsibility of looking after his parents who are not in the best of health. “I think I inherited the sense of responsibility from my father,” she says in her trademark serious demeanour, “My grandparents live in the village and he has to send them money for their upkeep as well as medicines and doctor visits. Both of them are diabetic and are getting on in age. My mother also supports him in taking care of his parents. She is quite selfless. Her life revolves around us and running our home.”

Jyoti went to a reasonably good school and was excellent in her studies. But when she completed her high school, the choice was between sending her to the college or her brother, who is younger to her by only an year. “My parents could afford to send only one of us for higher studies. They felt it was better to send my brother as he is a boy. I was disappointed but in a way, I understood them. After all, it is the boys who stay with the parents life-long. Girls have to get married and go to her husband’s house. Whether I agree with it or not, that is the hardcore reality. So I dropped out and stayed home for 11 months.”



One day when Jyoti was returning home after drawing water from the community borewell, she saw a few people at the end of the road to her house addressing a group who had assembled to listen to them. “They were mobilisers from CAP Foundation. They were explaining about the free courses they conduct for youngsters between 18-30. My curiosity went up and I stood there listening to them forgetting about the pot of water I was carrying. What got me very interested was their assurance of a placement in a good job after successful completion of the 3 month course.”

Jyoti landed up at the centre next day and decided to take up ITES course. “I always loved looking at computers. I had never seen one in real life until then. I had only seen one in movies and newspapers. So my choice was easy. For me it was a dream come true the day I touched the computer and learned to turn it on. I did not miss a single class. I did very well in the course and passed with good marks. The faculty prepared us for interviews and sent us out for placements. I got through a few interviews and I chose to join Credence India group as the job profile was interesting and also there were growth opportunities better than the others I had applied for.”

With her first salary of Rs. 10,000 Jyoti bought clothes for her parents and brother. “It will be one of the most memorable experiences of my life, when I went home with a bunch of presents for my family. The expressions on their faces were priceless. It made me feel very good that I had the resources to spread happiness to the ones I love. It’s an empowering feeling to earn your own money. It can’t be described in words. It’s a beautiful feeling,” says Jyoti absolutely thrilled with her achievement.

Neetu, 19, ITES: She's a bright spirited girl who calls a spade a spade. She has no qualms about saying it like it is and doesn't mince words when it comes to expressing her strong opinions. Meet 19-year-old Neetu who loves facebook and selfies. But that is now, after she has become financially independent. She has one elder sister and 2 younger sisters and a brother. Her father holds a job in a private company and earns Rs. 7000 which was barely sufficient for the family's basic needs. "I feel so good that I earn Rs. 10,000, 3000 rupees more than my father. He can't comprehend how that is possible but is very proud of me," says Neetu beaming happily.



Neetu's story is predictably similar to most in her milieu but the difference is in her never-say-die attitude and her ambition. "I want to head a team and lead 10-15 people at least. I never felt that my background can be a limiting factor. I knew, for sure, that someday I will have a great job and that I will build on my strengths and become a winner. I don't understand people who complain about their circumstances and use it as a crutch. Challenges should make us stronger, if we allow them to break us, we're losers in the game of life," says the spirited youngster.

She strongly believes that youth should not be frittered away with unrealistic pursuits for the perfect boyfriend and romance. "It's all good to see such things in movies. In real life, a girl should stand on her feet, earn money, build her bank balance, secure her future and then only consider looking for a guy," says Neetu with her head firmly on her shoulders.

It's very evident from her body language that she is all set to do just that. With a stable job in Credence group as a telecaller, she has built a good reputation with her superiors and is on her way up. With focus and determination, she believes she can overcome any challenge and make her family proud of her. With an attitude like hers, we're sure she will.

Neha, 22, ITES: Her father, a painter of buildings, always wanted his first born to be a boy. A palmist had predicted that to her mother when she was pregnant that she will give birth to a boy. So you can imagine the disappointment for them when it turned out to a girl! “I didn’t know this story until recently. I would always wonder why my father doesn’t express any affection towards me. I think the first time I saw him smiling while looking at me was when I gave him my first pay cheque.”



Even then, Neha wondered why he didn’t appreciate her in words or gestures. She consoled herself saying at least he was relieved that now there was someone to share his burden. After all, how much can a contract painter earn? “It’s been a few months since I have become the major bread winner earning more than him. But I am yet to hear a nice word from him. A few weeks back, I got so dejected with his lack of concern towards me and I asked my mother what makes him so indifferent towards me. That’s when she shared the story of how he was told that his first born will be a boy.”

Neha can’t fathom this whole obsession with a male child. “Here I am, earning more than him at 22, after completing a course which he did not pay for and yet, he thinks a boy would have been better? How am I any less?” she questions furiously. “My mother says it’s not his fault. We live in a male dominated society but I don’t understand! How can anybody hold his expectations of a child of certain gender against the child? How is it the child’s fault? And above all, why is being a girl considered bad? Isn’t everyone born to a woman? When the mother is considered next to God, why is the daughter a curse?”

So many questions in her mind which bother her so much that at times she can't sleep at nights. "I have learnt to focus on my job and not let these things bother me. I wonder how other girls deal with such harsh realities of life!"

Neha's job in a BPO as an agent, fetches her Rs. 10,000 as a salary. "I had no clue about offices and jobs. I didn't ever think I will be good enough to work in a corporate atmosphere and be appreciated for it," she says. Neha takes care of all the needs of her parents and 2 younger siblings – a brother and a sister. "I will help my sister go to a good school and lead a dignified life. I know that my father will take care of my brother's education even if he has to borrow money but I will help him too if necessary. My only aim in life is to be financially independent, strong and healthy so that I can be the son my parents always wanted."