



Dariya Tarangini Ghatak

I'm Dariya Tarangini Ghatak, a student of Biotechnology at St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. Having been around literature all my life it was a surprise when I decided to pursue a career in science. But I am and I think I'll always be firmly rooted in both worlds.

A View of the Streets

Sometimes within the predictable and comfortable surroundings of my college campus, everything starts to feel unreal, or, at least, less real. The familiarity

itself carries a certain discomfort. Discomfort that stems from the knowledge that only a few alleys over there is a very real, harsh world coexisting alongside

our sheltered one- the streets, the slums of India.

These worlds coexist peacefully but only because we are so



Image Credit- National Geographic

comfortable staying within a carefully crafted bubble of ignorance. A bubble which at times is rudely burst by interrupting thoughts of the harrowing realities of this world, our world.

I, for one, used to be peacefully unaware of the disturbing face of this world that really isn't so far from ours. It's easy for us to go about our lives not acknowledging, not opening our eyes to this part of our world. When we do acknowledge it, we are so accustomed to writing off the pangs that arise as minor inconveniences. The pangs fade and we turn our backs on an entire reality.

This summer I was plunged headfirst into this world. The one that recently, without a second thought, was hidden in shame to spruce up our capital for an international summit. An entire reality ignored, as if it isn't ours to be bothered about.

I decided to volunteer at an NGO this summer, hoping to give

back, hoping I'd make a difference with my meagre month of volunteering. On the very first day, as I tried to locate the local school I was supposed to teach at. I made my way through the impossibly convoluted, congested slums of Chandni where the streets get narrower and more winding, the houses getting closer and closer together till they merge into a continuous structure separated poorly by makeshift partitions. I found myself in front of a tiny four-walled hut which I soon learnt was the school I had been looking for. That tiny room full of with children, full of charts, posters, paintings made by the children, full of colour, full of life, was the site of my education for the ensuing month.

Everyday exactly at 9 o'clock I made my way to the school and my days were spent teaching the children English and Math. These are children who come from difficult family lives, difficult realities, these are children for whom school is secondary. They struggle to keep up with their lives at home, let alone being able to make time and space for a formal education. Thanks to NGOs a lot of them still get sent to schools but the fact still remains that schooling can never be a priority for people who are so run down by life and reality every day. The attraction of a pack of dry biscuits and a piece of bread is what drives them to school every day.





Even so, some of the kids I taught, surprised me in the most beautiful way. As I proceeded to give a long-winded, and I'm sure not very interesting, explanation of the method of long division, a little boy called Shiv, not more than seven, listened intently. Never having heard of division before, he was fascinated. When I tried to show him how to work out a problem, he stopped me and said he wanted to try it himself. The ease with which he did it and subsequently the ease with which he performed any mathematical problem was nothing short of impressive. Just like Shiv, there were others who stood out so starkly among the rest of the children. The chaos of their surroundings seemed to not perco

late through to them. These kids worked on their studies, intent on learning, intent on breaking the cycle.

I did a lot of growing up in the single month that I worked with those children. A lot of it was painful, a lot of it was good. All of it was beautifully tragic. Here were these children, no less capable or deserving than any of us, thrown into a life so harsh. Still there they were, trying to break out of it. The saddest part of all was seeing children of five, six, seven, so casually acquainted with the cruelties of the world. Toddlers who can't say their abc's know that they have to take care of their families, even financially, because their fathers were

never there and their mothers struggle to put food on the table. There they were- mothers who never got a chance to go to school, who don't have an inkling what goes on at schools, giving up everything to send their children to one because all they know is that a school is a chance for their children to live an easier life.

For the first time, I saw a child eating as a necessity of life. Eating because he has to, hungry or not, because proper food is a rarity. Eating like we gasp for air after running a marathon- a fact of the body, something we do unthinkingly simply because there is no room for questions.

These were children born and raised on the streets so there was no way to tell them that even then, the streets aren't safe. No way to tell them not to wander off, whichever way their feet take them. And so, one day I walked into the school and saw all my children but one, Somnath. I was told he had wandered off two days ago and had never returned. His parents,

his friends, were used to this, they weren't too scared. But the other teachers there, who had worked with them for years, who knew these people and these streets, who knew these dangers intimately, sat with ashen faces. They had heard from someone that Somnath had gone to Babughat. Another place to fear. Babughat, any ghat for that matter, is a hub for kidnapping, trafficking children. To us these may sound like far away worries, things that will never touch us. But when you step onto these streets, when you look around and you see children disappearing never to return- they don't seem so distant anymore.

Three days after disappearing, Somnath returned with a black eye and a swollen face. We learnt later that his jaw was broken.

How could this happen? Oh, this happens every day. The constant uncertainty and fear these lives are filled with is unimaginable to me, and I'm sure to a lot of us. But it shouldn't be this way.

There shouldn't be such an easy escape from knowing the tragedy of these lives. Just as I had a lot of compassion for children of the streets, people of the streets, I had no idea about their everyday realities. The window that this summer gave me has left me completely disturbed, has taken away my peace of mind. You might say, why then? Why disrupt our precious peace when you can't do much about it anyway? All I know is this 'peace' we so cherish is nothing but an illusion- a product of immense, accidental, undeserving privilege. I don't know what we can do to help. But I know that if there are children, families living with these realities, the first step

to helping is opening our hearts to the agony that comes with it.

I think we should let our minds be suitably disturbed.

