In conversation with Jaswinder Singh (Protsahan India Foundation, Delhi)

1. **What is the process of getting street children enrolled in schools?**
   Enrolling children from underserved communities in formal schools is a challenging task, often compounded by the fact that many of them are unwilling to join themselves mainly due to lack of initiation into schooling from an early age, along with the fact that their parents and families often live in strenuous circumstances where survival is far more important than an education and education always becomes an "opportunity cost" vis a vis "survival" in those circumstances for that family in question. To compound the matters further, the education system often lacks at sparking their creativity and gives them apathetic teachers who do not encourage with empathy and creativity in the classroom, sometimes are even physically torturous and as a result, a large majority of children quickly lose all remaining interest in education.

   Given these basic facts, bringing such children to school requires a two-pronged strategy that we follow at Protsahan. First, their *"rescue from point of abuse"* (child sexual abuse, child marriage, incest, etc.) needs to be looked at, and immediately thereafter, their curiosity and creativity has to be piqued in order to get them interested in school. Second, when they do get to that stage, they need a *"bridge course"* to get them up to speed with the learning process appropriate to their age, because more often than not, at this stage the child is already between 8-12 years of age. Bridge course at Protsahan, for eg. comprises the very basics in English, Hindi, basic mathematics, computers, educational videos, art-based activities, general awareness in addition to grooming and *"psychological counseling"* under the close care of teachers. Once they have gone through that, that's the time when our grassroots social workers approach local school administrations and help the parents and the children in the enrollment process. This is where it is most crucial to get the community on board with their own child's progress through *"school enrollment"*. If the community and the family isn't on board, during school enrollment process, it'll very commonly then, end in low attendance and subsequently high dropout rates. However, that too is not the end of the process. It is often seen that children from such backgrounds require a constant stimulus for a longer duration of time to stay in school, especially when they lack any guidance or encouragement at home. This objective is achieved through our *"after-school program"* at Protsahan where we keep the children engaged in creative pursuits with a direct link to their formal education via tuition based coaching from 6th-12th grades, that helps them through their schooling. Early this year, our work over the past eight years has yielded results with the first batch of our children appearing for their 12th grade exams, and clearing them with excellent scores in Humanities and Commerce streams.

2. **How are street children roped into the RTE system when they lack identification? How is the problem of lack of identification dealt with?**
   Our work is centered around adolescent at-risk girls in the underserved communities of urban slums of West Delhi than with street children directly. In our experience, we have almost always had to help the family and the child by applying for the birth certificate and/or the Aadhaar card because the parents are completely unaware of how to get the documentation for their girls' school enrollment. They'd rather prefer to get a ration card made after so much hassles, however, they don't even do that because it means at least one

unproductive day with no wages, if not more. What adds to the problem is the lack of actionable data points of slum and street children that could help in targeting and hence help children to access RTE or even enrollment in a government run school.

Second, what the government should really consider is incentivising the government school system to reach out to children at least in their own vicinity. Moreover, there's an absence of a joint mechanism at the ministerial level where the responsibility to implement the RTE lies with the Department of Education, the WCD Ministry is responsible for the health and safety of slum & street children, and the Department of Social Welfare has the jurisdiction to take charge of children addicted to substance abuse, which often is the case in street children. This lack of a coordinated approach deprives these children of one of their most fundamental rights i.e. Right to Education.

The second part of the question has to be also looked at from the lens of empathy for a child who has never been to a school setup, be groomed for it in the first place. The psychosocial counseling piece of the pie is absolutely missing.

3. **Street children are often taken off the streets and put into shelters to keep them from begging and provide them with an education. However their safety here is often reported to be compromised with occurrences of sexual abuse and violence. How much of a reality is this, and what are the mechanisms in place to ensure their safety?**
That absolutely, you're right is a massive issue to tackle. It is not only sexual violence but a lot of violent physical and mental bullying that goes on in many child care institutions right under the eye of the caretaker warden. These problems have far reaching negative impact on the child's wellbeing.

The answers to this cannot be framed in a few lines. It requires massive overhaul of the state machinery in how they work with children. To begin with, extensive empathy based trainings for the superintendents in charge of these institutions should be made mandatory, and only those who clear this certification program should be allowed to work with children at these institutions. Recently the Delhi Government had issued guidelines for the safety and security of children in all the child care institutions in the national capital which include CCTV cameras which are effectively monitored at all times, and adequate number of security officers. In addition, all personnel should be trained to address disclosures of abuse, violence, neglect, exploitation, discrimination, bullying and harassment, or any other serious concern to the child's safety. This should be complemented with step-by-step procedures on reporting, investigation of any allegations of abuse of power by a child with clearly defined guidelines for confidentiality of the child and sanctions against the abuser.

4. **What are the structural gaps in implementing the laws for reintegrating kids back into families - how can they be filled?**
Reintegration is not a single event, but a long process involving extensive preparation and follow-up support. Despite the importance of family reintegration, to date, solid guidance for safe and effective reintegration is limited. To ensure that reintegration is successful, it is as vital to invest in families as it is in children, the law does not state this at all as of now. Children should be at the heart of the reintegration efforts. Their views must be listened to

and acknowledged as best as possible, but that too does not happen as of now. Children should be fully engaged in each stage of the reintegration process. There's also a need to acknowledge that lack of quality education in home community can cause roadblocks in the reintegration process. Poverty and lack of education is either a significant underlying factor, or the primary factor in a vast majority of the cases of separation of children from families. It is, therefore, fundamentally important to understand the role of poverty in cases of separation and seeing to it that those are addressed appropriately and effectively.

The UNCRC clearly states that the children's rights are indivisible and interdependent, with no one right taking precedence over another. Thus, agencies engaged in reintegration must recognise the full range of children's rights, and strive, as far as possible, to fulfil them. Realistically, resources are frequently inadequate and/or other obstacles exist, making it impossible to fulfil all rights simultaneously. Agencies may need to make difficult choices about which rights to prioritise in the short term, whilst still maintaining the eventual goal of fulfilling them all.

*As one of the first steps, all efforts should be taken to **clarify any legal issues relating to the identity and documentation of the child.***

Governments have the responsibility to coordinate reintegration of children, allocate adequate funds, and ensure that efforts are properly monitored. However, in cases where government structures/laws are inadequate, engaging NGOs, community groups, families and children themselves is a must to bring additional strengths to reintegration processes. Since poverty and access to schooling are key factors impacting the safe and effective reintegration processes, it becomes imperative to implement programs that include actors in other related sectors, like education, social protection, justice and law enforcement, economic strengthening, and health.

5. **Does begging help children on the streets actually earn a livelihood? Or are they exploited by begging rackets?**
   The children in such conditions are at obvious serious risks to their health and person. They are mistreated, malnourished, and are often kept subdued on drugs that results in a vast majority of them getting addicted to narcotics at a very young age, sometimes even as young as 5-6 years of age. This can be attributed to a network of begging and trafficking rackets that hound the underserved communities as kids in such places are the easiest targets of all.

6. **How effective is the education these children receive in making them employable? Is there a need for them to receive a more skill-based education?**
   In recent times, there have been many efforts by the government at the central and state levels to upgrade the education system. However, the school education system still needs an overhaul in many aspects to ensure that children have a basic understanding of their future employability prospects after 10+2 education. At present, this is a serious lag in the overall system that results in further loss of interest of children in education. As we pointed earlier, for a family plagued by immense poverty, education is the 'opportunity cost' that the family has to pay against survival. A lot more definitely needs to be done on skill-based education

to ensure that it not only empowers them to think for themselves, but also equips them with employable life skills that will make a real difference in their lives.

To illustrate the point into practical perspective, we at Protsahan, in our after-school program go a step beyond giving just "employable skill-based education" to the at-risk adolescent girl from the slum neighborhood. We instead, provide "entrepreneurial and employable skill based education" that doesn't leave her searching for jobs at the end of the 10th/12th grade education. We train her in entrepreneurial life skills like photography, filmmaking, arts, etc. that equips them with entrepreneurial life-skills that can help them to become self employed. For example, one of the girls at Protsahan who is in 11th grade is now the de-facto wedding photographer in her community after being trained in photography for 4 years along with school coaching. Another one is working at a clay arts-studio and preparing for her 10th grade examinations from open school. These children come from such difficult circumstances that if entrepreneurial life skills were not embedded within their schooling structure, they wouldn't get any education at all if left to their families.

7. **How effective is the RTE Act and child right laws in getting children off the streets and keeping them in schools?**
   Rules and laws alone cannot achieve that. It has to be collaborative effort by the authorities, school administration, and the civil society at large to ensure that children are protected from any kind of abuse and continue their education unhindered. Moreover, these efforts have to be overarching to ensure that not only children in the underserved sections of society, but also in the other better served parts of society have access to the same educational and health resources critical for their growth.